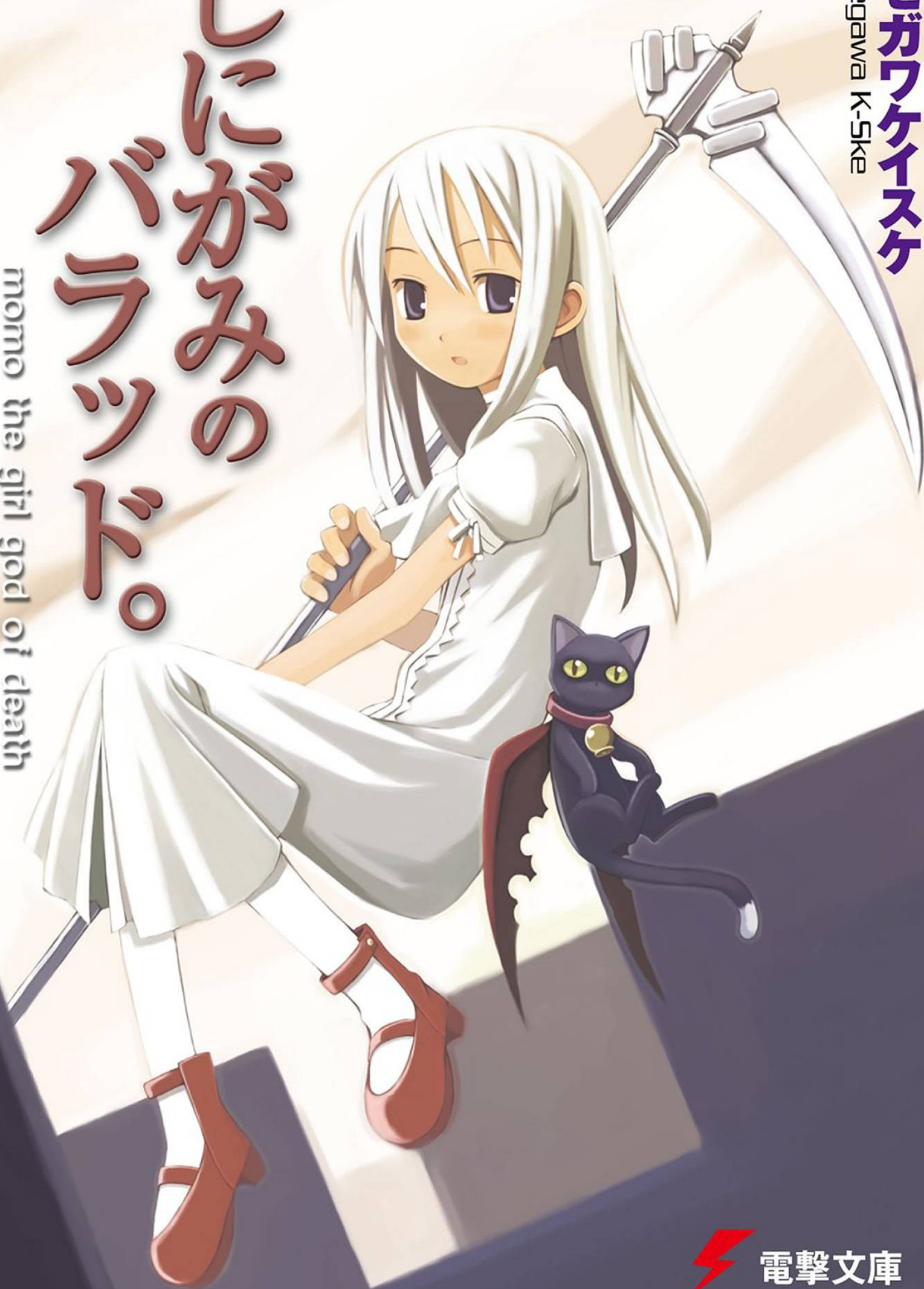


ハセガワ ケイスケ

Hasegawa K-Ske

しにがみの バラッド。

momo the girl god of death



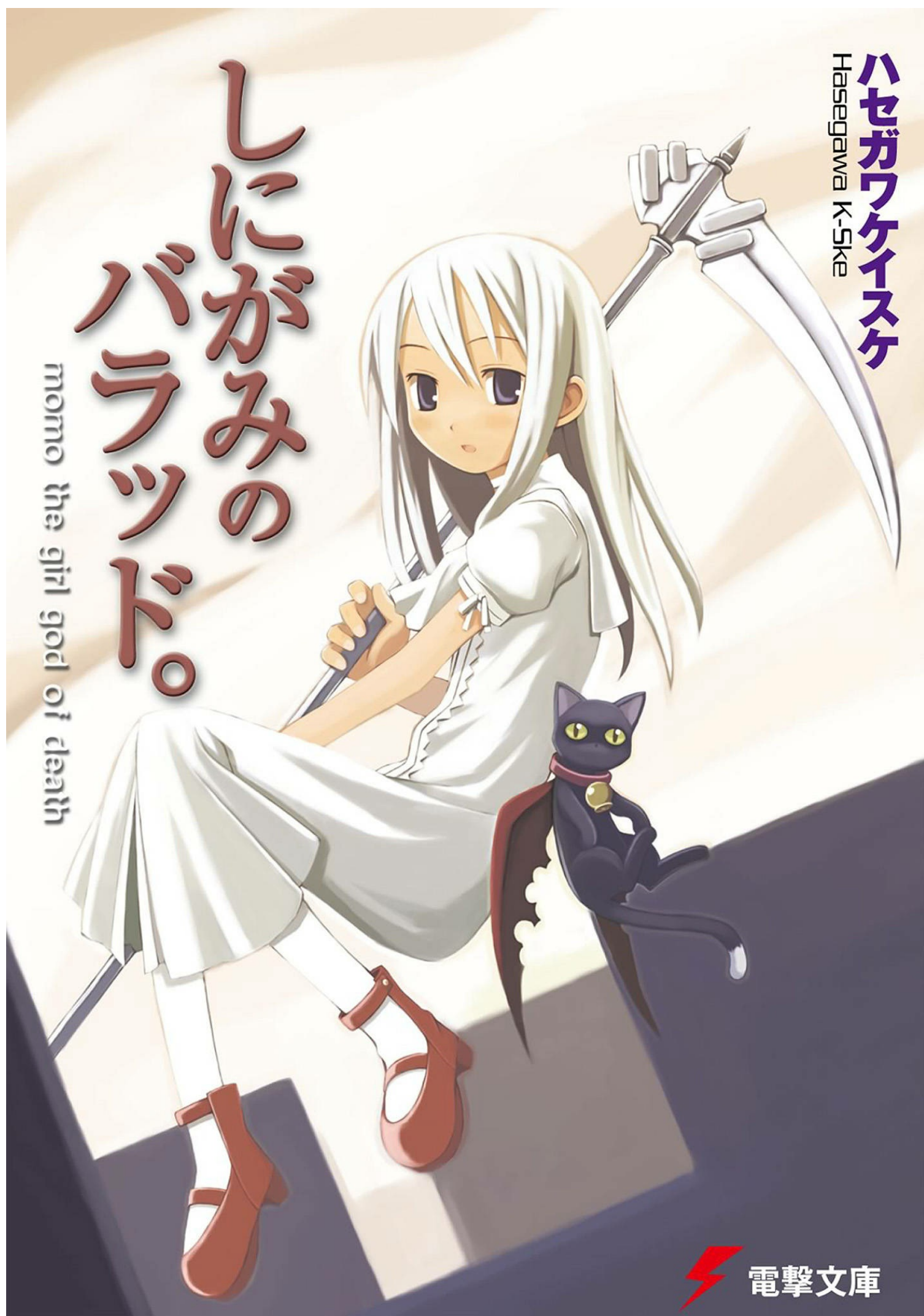
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しにがみのバラッド

Ballad of a Shinigami I

Hasegawa Keisuke

Illustrations by Nanakusa

Translated by Ray Yoshimoto

Seven Seas Entertainment / SpicyEpubs

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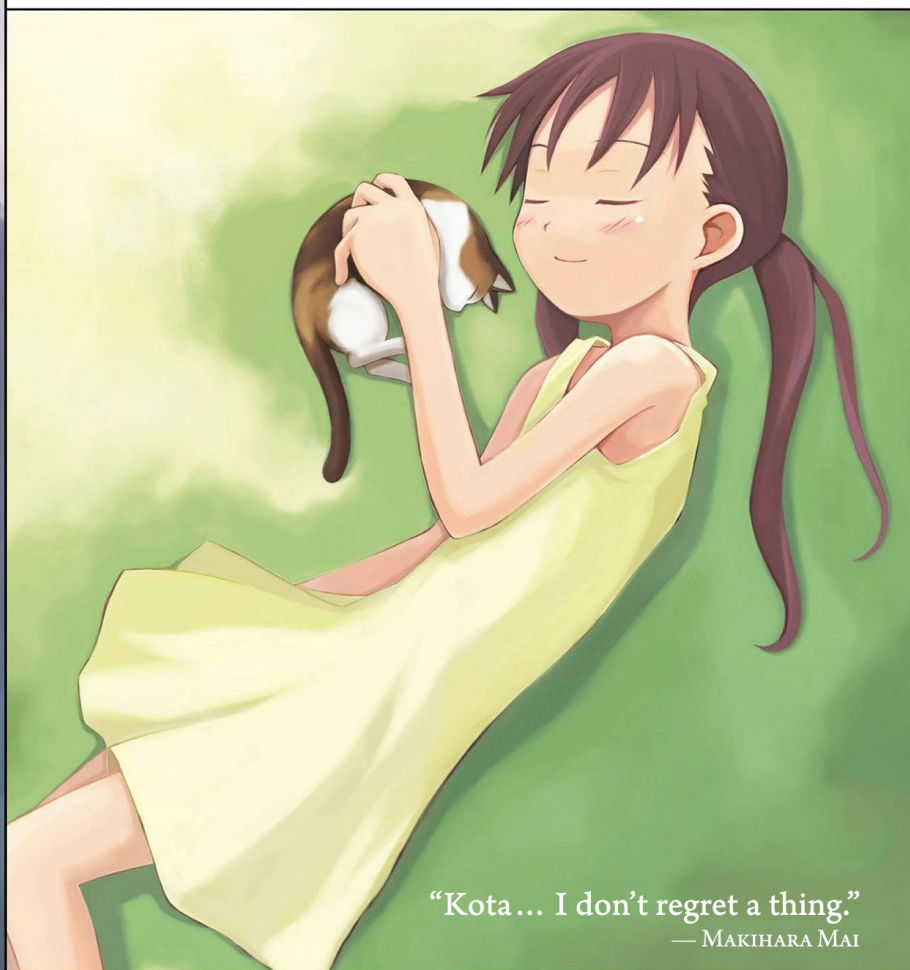




“A shinigami?”
— IKUMA DAIKI

“Yes, I’m a shinigami
— THE GIRL IN WHITE

"I swear I'll protect you."
— SETO KOTA



"Kota... I don't regret a thing."
— MAKIHARA MAI



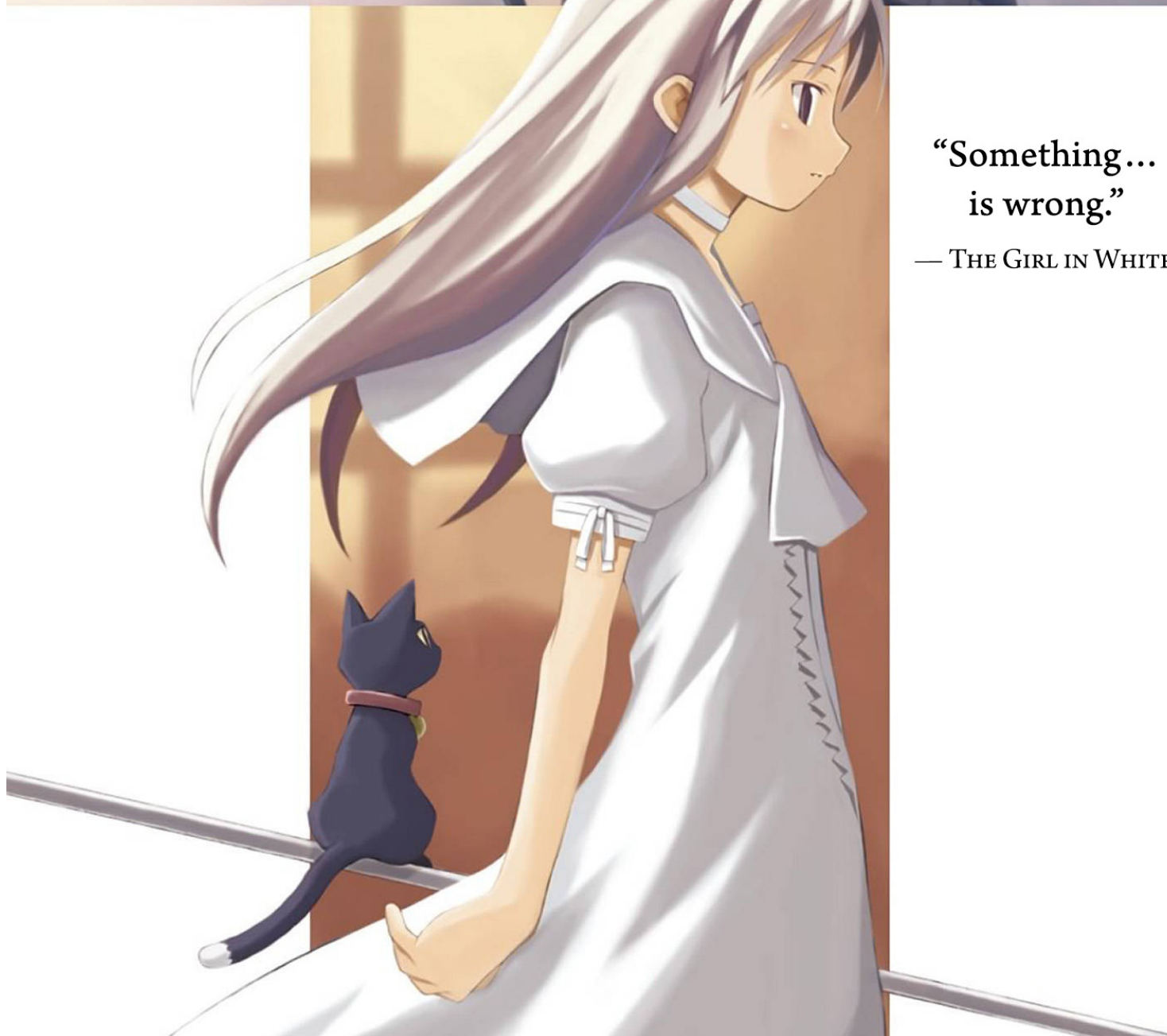
“Thanks for your help!”
— HAYAMA MAKOTO

“Ah ha ha!”
— HIURA TOIRO



“Where’s Daddy?”

— TOWA



“Something...
is wrong.”

— THE GIRL IN WHITE

“If you stop covering your ears, you can clearly hear your own footsteps.”

Overture

Close Your Eyes

There, by herself, stood a girl.

The girl wore red shoes.

Though she did not know why.

For the girl had no memory.

The girl carried the burden of a single mission.

To deliver someone's life.

—To take it.

That was her appointed mission, a mission born of tears.

She was an administrator of death.

A dark messenger.

Why was she born?

Why is she here?

And so, the girl set out.

To find herself.

She was a white presence amidst a world of black.

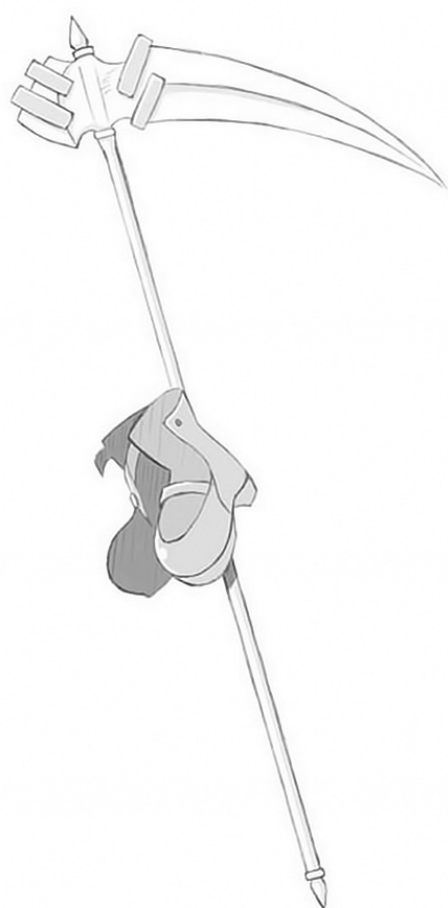
Pure white, born of tears.

She needed to find the reason for her existence.

She would carry the black with her, but only in her pupils, and see the world without pretense.

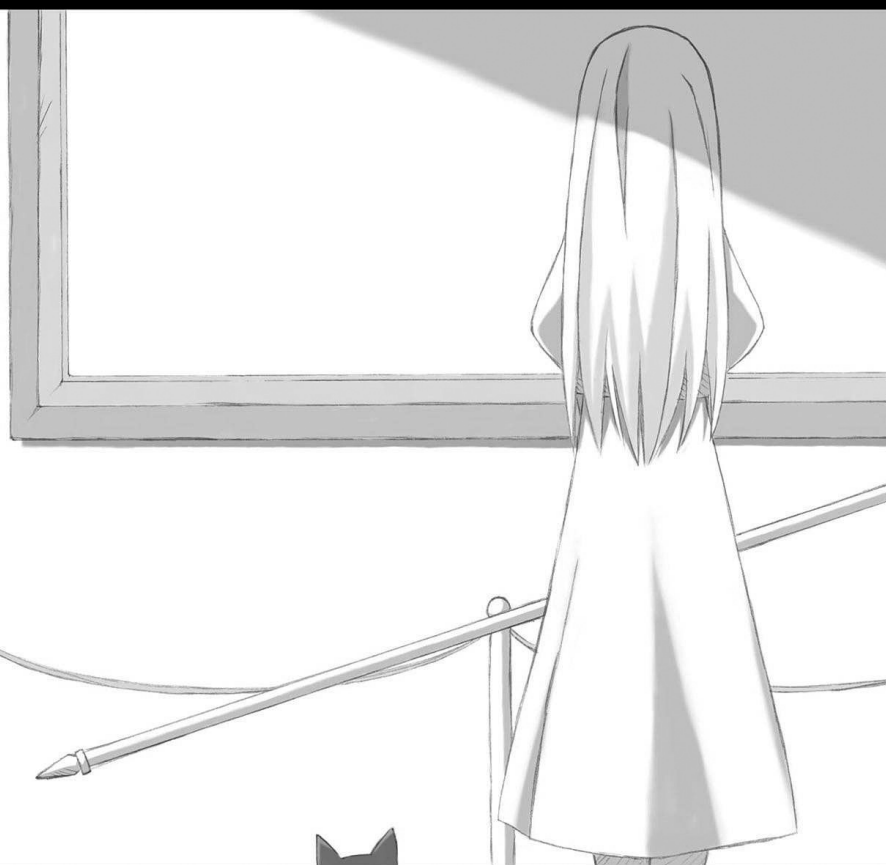
A day would come when she would understand.

So, she decided to put on her red shoes and set out.



I

A Trace of Light:
I Feel the Light



—Light, illuminates, shines



—*Ring.*

The soft tinkling of a bell. A faint sound, a mere whisper of a ring.

He opened his eyes and saw three grade-schoolers running noisily by. His sight was drawn to the good luck charm dangling from one of the children's backpacks. It bounced in an irregular rhythm.

It seemed he had been asleep for quite a while. Nearby, a train crawled forward. The rattling it made on the tracks was the same rhythm as the beating of his heart.

The sound of a train running on a designated track at a designated time. The air that never changed. The sound of laughter that always made him gag. The people who drifted off to sleep, their brows painfully furrowed. The unchanging scenery.

Me, the same as always. I'm used to it. I've gotten used to it.

His home was still a few stations away, but an in-car announcement blared that everyone had to get off at the next stop. It was a normal, mundane announcement, yet he wondered how many people experienced the sort of tension that made it hard to even breathe. That was how Ikuma Daiki felt.

The train slowed and entered the station platform. Inertia kicked in and bodies were pushed and pulled, all at the mercy of unseen forces. Daiki stood and approached the door. He could still see light outside, an indication there was still some time left before dusk set in. Inside, the train was heavy with a lazy atmosphere. But when the doors opened, the bracing February air could be felt on one's cheeks.

How many times have I descended upon this very platform?

He had been here several times now, and each time he felt as if his breath would be stifled. The very first time, he had managed to find the place by following newspaper and magazine articles and photos. It wasn't very far from the station. Now, just like a local, Daiki easily navigated his way to the right exit.

He walked towards his target destination.

After a while, a peculiar-looking building came into view, contrasting somewhat with the quiet surroundings. It was a building that, several years prior, had been abandoned even before construction was completed.

Although it didn't have a "no trespassing" sign, a chain-link fence encircled the building. Daiki slid his overly thin frame through a small opening and entered the facility. In several places, there was evidence that others had entered in the same manner.

There was graffiti on the walls, but nothing that could remotely be called art. It further heightened the effect of abandonment. It seemed to be some kind of message, but outsiders had no way of understanding its meaning.

The windows on the first floor were all broken; bits and shards were scattered about the ground. Glass crunched under Daiki's feet as he entered the building. His gaze fell upon a mountain of obscenely discarded trash.

A small path that snaked away from the garbage led to a stairway and the upper floors. Both Daiki and *that* boy had taken the same path. He proceeded to go upstairs.

Unlike the psychological feeling of suffocation he had felt at the station, this time it was a physical shortness of breath that Daiki felt as he used his legs to go upstairs. No way would there be any working elevators here.

Ninth floor. Most trespassers would never even bother coming this high. So, unlike the floors below, this one was not cluttered with garbage or broken glass. On the other hand, there was a carpet of dust and words written in magic marker.

Those words had remained, without disappearing.

The boy had committed suicide about a year ago. At the time, he had been a third-year student in junior high. He had leapt from the ninth floor.

He had scrawled countless words on the walls of this floor. Words which could have been poetry or could have been his final will and testament.

Crap.

It's all crap.

Living is crap.

Life has no meaning.

None. Nowhere to be found.

Crap.

Why doesn't anybody realize this?

That was his last message to the world.

Daiki approached the window where the boy had leapt into the dusk sky. After the boy's suicide, the police had covered all of the windows on this floor with tape. Daiki removed part of the tape so he could peer outside. He wanted to see the scenery the boy had seen. He forced open the rattling window.

Daiki's hair had grown irritatingly long, as if to erect a barrier against all human interaction. From between the countless black strands, he viewed a distorted world.

The sun began its descent. The sky would soon be painted a bright Bengal orange.

One year ago, the boy had seen this same view. He had realized he had no wings, yet, still, he had tried to fly.

What had caused him to do so—as he had looked down upon the world he hastily dismissed as crap—Daiki wondered. For one whole year, he thought of it, until he turned the same age the boy had been.

He gazed upon that very same view.

And as he did so, Daiki spat and looked down at the world.

The boy had died. He had taken his own life and ended his path forever. But Daiki was not dead, yet neither was he truly alive. The boy's poem was one of despair, but Daiki had been strangely touched by it. It was as if he had discovered a "light" amidst his dark despair. And so, Daiki saw the boy as

shining brightly.

Suddenly, he felt as if he had discovered something, a simple answer. He might even have known it for a long time now.

“I am... the same as him...

“I want to become ‘light’ just like him. But what must I do to become light?”

The boy, to bring his thoughts to the surface, had left his “poem.”

It was later discovered that he had several other poems and thoughts, scribbled in notebooks he had left behind. Those feelings remained in this world too, as light.

“Then, what should I do?” Daiki asked himself.

He decided that merely standing there, doing nothing, was not an adequate form of acceptance of the boy’s poem. Daiki removed his sketchbook from his bag and began to violently draw on the empty white paper with a piece of charcoal.

“It’s a nonsensical world. So I’ll draw a nonsensical picture.”

Everything is crap. This is my final scene.

“I’ll draw a picture to end it all.”

He scrawled shapes that appeared in his brain, in his retinas—tattered patterns that fell into black lines, surfacing on paper as black and white masses. Roughly, violently, yet at times delicately, the lines began to come together under the influence of Daiki’s guiding hand. Hardly pausing for breath, he drew a world that was utterly dark. Something deeply mad to the point of sadness, steeped in loneliness, a broken world. Although drawn in deep blacks, portions of white jumped out vividly.

“Huff, huff.” Daiki tried to catch his breath.

He closed his eyes and slowly lowered his hands; the sketchbook tumbled to the floor. Shortly thereafter, the charcoal followed—now worn down smaller than his pinkie fingernail—and dropped to the ground with a quiet plink.

A carpet of dust billowed in the air. Only the quiet sounds of his breathing,

pumped out by his heaving lungs, could be heard.

“Huff huff. Huff huff... huff... huff... huff... huff...”

As Daiki opened his eyes once more, he saw in front of him the white clouds of his breath and the sky outside turning to dusk. As if to shake loose his thoughts, a strong wind blew forth. His body responded instinctively. Daiki put his hand on the windowsill and leaned half of his body outside.

“.....”

The ground below seemed far away. The height was enough to make him dizzy. This was a place cut off from the world.

He had no wings to fly. Scattered tufts of dust drifted in the air like feathers, but they were not his wings. He had no wings. He’d realized that about himself for a long time now.

Crap.

Crap.

Crap.

Crap.

Crap—

Like a chant, the words rang over and over again in Daiki’s head.

Fly. Reach for the sky. You can do it, he thought.

“I’ll never see this warped twilight again... Goodbye, fleeting world—”

Just as he was about to hurl himself out the window, it happened.

—*Ring.*

The tinkle of a bell. And then, a voice.

“Do you want to fly?”

The voice came from somewhere nearby. No, it was whispered in his ear. Not

expecting this, Daiki swallowed hard.

There shouldn't be anyone else here, Daiki thought.

No matter how focused he was on his task, he would have noticed if someone had come near. His body froze, but he managed to move his eyes towards the direction of the voice.

A face was there. Close enough for him to feel an exhaled breath on his cheek, if there had been any.



She had big eyes, mostly pupils, and faintly red lips. Her skin was the same hue as snow. Her jaw was rounded yet straight, framed by her dangling, vividly white hair. She was small and appeared to be a child, but what a breath-takingly fantastic child she was.

“...Wha...” Daiki stammered.

He couldn't form words, let alone blink.

“If you're going to fly,” the girl continued, “then you need to spread your wings. Or... would you just rather die?”

She fixed her large, black eyes on his. Her childish, soft voice sounded strangely mature.

“If you fall from here, it will be quite painful. Unless you wish to kill yourself, of course.” The girl laughed softly.

Daiki quickly regained his senses. In trying to maneuver away from the girl, he ended up edging away from the window.

The girl had appeared, to begin with, as if she had popped out of his head, then tumbled into this world. She looked to be a bit younger than Daiki. She wore a white, one-piece dress and seemed to float in the air like some bizarre dandelion seed. She was overwhelmingly white, the monotony broken only by the shiny red shoes that adorned her feet.

In her hand, she held a long pole, which was about as tall as she was. At the top of the pole was a dull-colored, exaggerated L-shaped blade.

As his eyes began to focus, he saw a cat beside the girl. It was a black cat, with golden eyes as bright as the moon in the night sky. It wore a red collar with a large bell attached to it. Only the tip of its tail, which pointed towards the sky, was white.

The cat nimbly hopped onto the windowsill, which Daiki had perched himself upon just moments before. The bell hanging around its neck tinkled with the creature's movements.

And then, it *spoke*.

"Whoa, it's pretty high up here..."

The black cat opened its eyes wide and deftly put on an expressive face, shaking its body. Its voice was that of a young boy.

"Daniel, come here," called the little girl, and the black cat scampered over. She seemed to take no notice of the unbelievable occurrence of a cat speaking. To the girl, this was apparently a normal event. Or rather, the girl herself was *not* normal. She emitted a mysterious aura that was even stranger than the fact that the cat had spoken.

And what's more, she wore only a thin dress... in the middle of winter! Regardless, she stood there casually, as if everything was quite ordinary.

A tremor, something close to fear, raced through Daiki's body. Though his heart was beating fast, no blood flowed to his brain. Or at least that's what it felt like to him.

What the hell is with these guys...?! his brain screamed.

"Oh, we haven't introduced ourselves," she answered, perhaps hearing Daiki's thoughts. Or was it because Daiki had, without noticing, actually voiced them out loud?

"Daniel..."

Prompted by the girl, the cat named Daniel stood on two legs and curled his tail to the front. He then skillfully grabbed hold of the white tip with his front paws. Thus, the cat formed a "ring," and into this ring, the little girl inserted her hand.

“...?!” Daiki almost lost his breath.

The hand the girl inserted into the ring did *not* emerge on the other side. It was as if the ring had become a link to another dimension.

“Huh?” the girl muttered. “Where did I put it?”

“Hey...! Stop moving so much! Ow!”

Ignoring Daniel’s struggles and protests, the girl inserted her arm further inside until half the length of her arm, up to her elbow, disappeared inside the ring.

“Owwwwwwwwww,” Daniel bawled.

“Oh... there it is,” she announced. “Oopsy daisy...”

“Hnff!” the cat snorted.

“You don’t have to fuss about everything,” she answered back. “That’s why I hate doing this.”

She removed her arm from the ring and withdrew a white object, which looked like a card case. Frozen like a doll, Daniel plopped to the floor. The girl continued to ignore him; she fixed her attention on Daiki.

“Here...”

She opened the case, took out a card and brought it to Daiki’s eyes. The card appeared to be some sort of identification, large-sized, with a photo of the little girl wearing a surly look.

shinigami #a-100100

“Er... 'shini...gami'...?” he asked, perplexed.

“If saying #A-100100 is hard for you, then you may simply call me ‘Momo,’” the girl explained. “Daniel calls me that. And I do like it better.”

The girl—Momo—spoke these words, which under normal circumstances might have sounded like a joke, without the hint of a smile. She was dead

serious. That made it even harder for Daiki to believe.

“A shinigami?”

That word seemed larger than the rest of what she’d said and tugged at something in his heart.

“Yes, I’m a shinigami.”

Momo nodded as if nothing else could be more ordinary. If what she said was true, then this was—beyond a doubt—a genuinely idiotic situation.



In this world, the only persons who went around calling themselves something like that were either martial artists with a chip on their shoulder or complete nut jobs.

But Daiki was flat out of sighs and couldn't possibly manage to expel one more, despite the absurdity of the situation.

In any case, he thought, *Did they think they'd shock me with something like this? Or maybe this is someone's idea of a bad joke? I must've come across some people on a totally different level of wattage.*

Still, Momo looked neither like a martial artist nor a complete nutcase. Although she definitely held a large sickle-like thing in her hand, Momo's appearance was nothing like the publicly held image of a shinigami.

Rather, she wore a white, one-piece dress and cute shoes. There was no way this innocent-looking little girl could be an instrument of death or bring about a person's demise. She couldn't possibly be a shinigami.

"Don't mess with me." Daiki's throat was parched, and he spoke in a low, croaking voice.

"I'm not lying," Momo retorted. "Though, yes, I *have* been told I don't look the part."

Daniel spoke, shifting his weight from his hind legs to all fours. "That's right. Momo is the genuine article, a bona fide shinigami. Of course, she doesn't quite look like one, though."

At this point, with all the craziness going on, the fact that a cat was speaking seemed but a small part of it.

"Ha ha, a shinigami? A shinigami? I see. Okay, shinigami. Then you came here to kill me, is that it?!" Daiki asked, somewhat hopefully.

"No," Momo answered flatly. "I felt the presence of death. And then here you were. That's all."

Without making a sound, Momo approached the boy. "You're trying to kill yourself, aren't you?" she asked.

"Er..." Daiki hesitated. And it wasn't because his throat was dry.

“That’s odd. You do want to die, don’t you?” Momo asked. “Then why don’t you just do it?”

The boy’s body trembled upon hearing such words uttered without even a hint of emotion. Without warning, Momo giggled and moved away from him. She pointed towards the open window.

“Go ahead.”

As if hypnotized, Daiki was unable to look away from her childish yet straightforward gaze.

“If you jump from here, your wish will come true... Right? Then you’ll surely be dead.”

That word again. Death.

“Momo,” Daniel interrupted in a small, albeit urgent, tone. “Don’t you think this is wrong? He’s not on the list. If we take back an extra soul, we’ll get in trouble with the director again.”

“Are you talking about the fact that Heaven’s packed with so many souls they can’t accept any extras?” Momo asked. “The important thing is if he wants to die, I think it’s better to just let him have his way.”

“But Momo...” It was Daniel’s turn to stammer, as his head spun from the words of his mistress.

Turning back to Daiki, Momo urged, “Now, come on. Why don’t you just jump?”

“.....” Stunned, Daiki was unable to move a muscle.

“What are you doing? You were about to jump because you wanted to die, weren’t you?” Momo let out a big sigh. “I guess you can’t kill yourself after all. What was that now, just some spur of the moment thing? You can’t even kill yourself of your own free will. How sad.”

Momo looked at him with cheerless, pitying eyes. “At this rate, you won’t get the death you so desire. You probably confused the aura of death around you for your own, didn’t you?”

Momo’s words rang in Daiki’s ears and then slowly traveled to his brain.

Slowly being absorbed. Melting.

“As proof, even though we’re supposed to be invisible, you can see us,” Momo continued. “You are surely emitting the scent of death. But it isn’t yours. Remember that. Okay then... See you.”

—*Ring*.

In an instant, everything went white. Daiki was taken aback. He looked around, and, of course, nobody was there.

“So what was that just now?” he asked. “A dream?”

He felt sick and dizzy, and struggled to avoid collapsing.

“...It was just a bad dream,” he said to himself. “I had a bad dream. Maybe I came too close to death...”

He had let his chance slip away. Death was now estranged from him. Now it seemed better to get far away from this place. At least for today.



The bell rang as he descended onto the platform. The train he had just been on began to move towards the next station. Waving his train pass, he went through the turnstile. It was only about ten-odd minutes to his house from here.

Daiki’s brain refused to think; he was unable to clear his mind.

The ninth floor of the building. He had no clear memory of what had happened after he began drawing. Fragments of images, like photographs, formed layers in his mind.

The pictures he drew in black. The orange-colored sky. Sunset. Uneasiness. An impulse. Red shoes. Sad eyes. A line. Tied up in knots. Unfeeling. That impulse. White clothes. Black cat. Little girl. Words.

Wind. Dust. The impulse of death.

It was all surreal, and his brain was rejecting it. It couldn't possibly be real.

Don't touch what's real to me.

He realized he was at the front gate of his house. He inserted the key and turned it, placing his hand on the doorknob. For an instant, he hesitated in opening the door. It had been quite a while since he had last felt this way.

A long time ago, when he was still in grade school, he had thought, *If I open this door, it'll happen again.*

But nowadays, he felt nothing and had not felt like that for a long time. He opened the door and stepped inside.

"I'm home..." He said it to no one in particular. Removing his shoes then lining them up properly, he went into the living room, which he had to pass through first in order to get to his room.

Upon stepping into the living room, a person's senses would be assaulted by various antique furniture and accoutrements, acquired in accordance with the *bastard's* tastes. These were uselessly distorted and served no function at all. They were beyond Daiki's, or any normal person's, comprehension and were crammed everywhere.

Today, something else was crammed in there. As Daiki entered, he saw the backside of "the bastard." His father—Ichiyo—was nestled deeply into the sofa, one hand clutching a brandy glass.

Ichiyo rarely ever drank alcohol. If he did, it would be to sip a little at some event or party. But he almost never poured himself a glass at home, alone. Yet here he was today. He must have been in an especially good mood.

His work, though he had already done dozens of overseas exhibitions, must have been a particularly big success. After all, he was the world-renowned painter, Ikuma Ichiyo.

Regardless of an artist's qualities as a human being, if his paintings were splendid, he would be recognized.

"Father, you're home." The words coming from Daiki's mouth sounded flat, with no hint of emotion.

Remaining seated, without even turning to face his son, Ichiyo spoke in a low, resonant tone. “What were you doing, staying out until this hour? There isn’t much time until your exhibition. Neglecting your work while I was away?”

His voice rang with dignity and strength; it had a largeness to it. In contrast, Daiki’s sounded indifferent.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry, I won’t ruin your good name, Father. I’ve been drawing.”

“I see,” Ichiyo replied. “Then show me.”

As ordered, Daiki took out his sketchbook and flipped through the pages. Though nonchalant at first, his indifferent manner quickly disappeared in the next instant, while his emotions began to pulse rapidly.

Staring him in the face was the scene he had drawn at the building. The black, warped landscape that was supposed to be his last will and testament to the world.

Daiki suddenly realized the illusory incident, which he had dismissed as a dream, was reality. He struggled to suppress feelings of panic.

It couldn’t be real. It couldn’t possibly be. It was just a dream. An illusion.

His brain replied, *Don’t touch what’s real to me.*

“What’s the matter?” his father prodded. “Hurry up.”

Daiki hesitated, but Ichiyo quickly snatched the sketchbook from him. Without a word, Ichiyo lowered his eyes and examined the drawing.

Thump, thump... Daiki’s heart beat at an exaggerated pace.

He wanted to ask his father, “What’s the matter? Why the big hurry?” but he couldn’t.

What are you afraid of? a voice in his head answered back. *So what if he sees it? Who cares what he says? What are you so afraid of at this point?*

But in the next instant, Daiki’s emotions suddenly dissipated.

“...What is this...?” Ichiyo focused his gaze on his son. “Are you clowning around, Daiki? What is this nonsense?”

“I’m sorry.”

“The upcoming exhibition is your debut as a painter,” Ichiyo spat back. “You should know how important your first exhibition is. So what is this crap? What are you doing doodling at a time like this?”

“...I’m very sorry,” Daiki managed to say.

“You just said you wouldn’t ruin my good name, didn’t you?” Ichiyo demanded.

“Yes.”

“Ruining my name aside,” Ichiyo continued, “this can’t even be considered garbage or dirt. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself for doing this? You, the son of Ikuma Ichiyo!”

And in one swift motion, Ichiyo ripped the sketch apart. Instead of getting angry, Daiki reacted coolly.

“I am sorry, Father,” he said quietly.

But Ichiyo was not done. He proceeded to rip the drawing into little pieces, over and over, before tossing the bits of paper into the wastebasket nearby. Satisfied, he let out a big grunt and sat back down on the sofa.

“Don’t ever draw anything like that again...” Ichiyo spluttered angrily. “Anything like that... that...”

He was about to say something, but thought better of it. Instead, he just swallowed his words.

“That’s enough,” Ichiyo managed to say. “Go.”

“Yes, Father...”

Daiki left his father behind and headed towards his bedroom, thinking, *The bastard only thinks of himself anyway.*

Daiki believed his father only wanted to save face, the face of the world-renowned Ikuma Ichiyo. He knew those were the words Ichiyo wanted to say to him, but never did.

That’s why it’s all crap, he reasoned.

Left alone, he finally found the words he never bothered to confront his father with.

I just have to do what you tell me, right? That's reality. It's the reality that I live with. And that's how I'll end. You're going to lead me there. And you'll realize that the rails you set for me go through a very dark tunnel.

"It's all crap."

It was as if the words were whispered to him.



Painting was a life destined for him, a life that was set for him before he could even remember. He existed only to paint. And now, no longer able to express himself through painting, he attempted to reject his own existence.

He was now nothing more than a portion of what Ikuma Ichiyo was worth. He could not communicate, nor was he allowed to defy.

In grade school, after school was out in the afternoon, while his classmates would go out to play, Daiki would head straight home. That was because Ichiyo forbade him to play with his friends. Ichiyo reasoned that consorting with his peers would result in the loss of his artistic sensitivity. Or he could even get hurt. So Daiki was forbidden from participating in the normal activities children around him got to enjoy.

At first, drawing was a purely enjoyable pastime. But it gradually became painful for Daiki.

He pretended to look down on his classmates, but, in truth, he envied them for being able to go to cram school and do other extracurricular studies. Those otherwise ordinary activities were enviable to him, even if the others complained that they were such a bore.

The strain of coercion, the difficulties—he tried to forget those by drawing.

There was also the presence of Ichiyo. Whether it was trying to live up to his father's expectations or trying to win his praise, those things began to loom

above Daiki—too large, too heavy—and began to tear at his heart.

When he drew to his heart's content, he was rejected and told it would never be accepted. When he was certain he could satisfy Ichiyo and joyfully showed off his work, he was told harshly it was a “useless” drawing. He was taught to suppress his visions, thoughts and feelings, and was required to produce universally acclaimed paintings that were guaranteed to win awards.

In order to escape from the pain, he suppressed his emotions, performed automatically—like a machine—held no interest in anybody, and simply waited for time to pass by. He sacrificed the things he wanted most. In so doing, he acquired superb painting skills.

After winning several awards, he was granted the opportunity to hold his first exhibition, one that was to be sponsored by a major publishing company. Still, it wasn't something he found fulfillment in. He was unable to smile from the bottom of his heart.

This is a crappy life. A worthless world. This is my reality. And this is the only reality I have. This must be... some kind of karmic revenge, Daiki reasoned. *I should never have been born. This must be revenge.*



“—Ikuma.”

It was break period. Daiki stood up to go to science class, when someone tapped him on the back. Turning back, he saw two of his male classmates looking at him with smirks on their faces. Behind them were several other boys and girls, all looking towards Daiki. Perhaps they wanted to talk to him and these two were their representatives.

The one who had tapped Daiki spoke up.

“Hey you, you're going to do some kind of art exhibition soon, right? I heard you got interviewed on TV or something. Is that for real?”

“Well, yeah...” Daiki replied.

“You were always good at art. Come to think of it, that's your painting hanging on the wall of the principal's office, isn't it?”

“...Yeah...” Daiki nodded vaguely.

The boy talking wasn't exactly a complete stranger. But on the other hand, the boy had never approached him in such a friendly manner before. In any case, Daiki decided the best thing to do would be to give a short answer which would probably be enough to satisfy them.

“Of course,” the boy continued, “your dad is pretty famous, isn't he? So, with you being his son and all...”

Daiki shot him a severe look. Although the boy was the same age as Daiki, he wilted under that powerful glare. Daiki, on the other hand, had lost patience with the conversation. He turned his back and left the classroom.

—*Slam!*

The abrupt sound of the door slamming shut echoed throughout the room.

You're all full of crap, he thought angrily. So what if my father is famous? Is an apology all I'm good for?

His furious steps mirrored the thoughts whirling violently through his mind. He already knew he would never be better than his father. Yet, nobody understood him. There was no one who understood his worth.

Well, that figures, he told himself. I have no worth anyway.

He again questioned his existence and what he was doing.

Living in this worthless world, am I, too, worthless? No, that can't be. There must be a way out.

He knew if there was one thing in the world that could save him, it was *that* place.

After Daiki stormed out of the classroom, the group that had been watching joined the two who had approached him. They all wore the same kind of irritated expressions on their faces.

“What the hell's with that guy?” one of them asked.

“He always did get on my nerves.”

“That’s just plain rude,” another stated. “What’s up with him?”

“All we wanted was to ask about his art.”

“Whatever, he can just roll over and die,” declared another.

“Come to think of it,” a girl said, suddenly remembering something, “I heard this from someone who went to grade school with him. You know that building where that junior high kid jumped? He said he’s seen Ikuma go into that building a few times.”

“For real?”

“What’s up with that?”

“Dumbass. Maybe he’s a freak who’s into that sort of thing, or...”

“Or?”

“Maybe he wants to kill himself?”

“Whoa, could be. He sure is gloomy and depressing enough.”

“Well, if he would just hurry up and die, then he wouldn’t be such a pain in the ass anymore.”

“Got that right.”

At this, they all laughed loudly, with mouths wide open and hands clapping. Here was an environment where people laughed about another person’s death.



On that day, what did the boy feel?

What was he thinking?

How did he make himself jump?

Daiki was again climbing to the top of the building. The ninth floor had not changed since he had visited a few days ago. He had been a bit hesitant to come back, ever since that day. He had tried to forget the “dream” because it was too fantastic, and if he didn’t, it might just become real.

This place still gave him comfort. It was a bittersweet, melancholy feeling, as if he had returned to the place that had given birth to him. When he was here,

he felt as if he could understand what the boy had thought and seen. He felt as if he could *fuse* and be one with the boy.

Usually, it was that way. But today was different.

He couldn't empathize with the boy. He couldn't feel anything. The poems the boy had left behind ceased to tell him things. It was because of that "dream." Because it had stirred up his reality.

He stared intently, in an attempt to summon forth the words from the ash-colored walls. He mumbled the words that used to appear before his eyes as if they were a song.

"Crap. Crap. Crap..."

The landscape at dusk. The black sketches. The color of blood on his dirty hands. Black lines. The torn drawing. The word "crap."

It was a drawing of a worthless world. Of course it was worth crap.

If you can't understand that, Daiki told himself, you're full of even more crap.

"Crap. Crap. Crap..."

The words were like an ink brush that drew an enormous picture in Daiki's mind. And finally, the fusion began anew. An irrepressible surge ran throughout his body.

Yes. This is my revenge.

He sought vengeance against the meaning of his birth. Vengeance against *himself*.

To say it was about expressing himself, to express his feelings, was all just an excuse.

If you're going to call it art, then I will throw it away. I will erase everything. And this drawing... me, myself. I will be the art.

Just as the boy had become "poetry," in the same manner, Daiki himself would become a "picture." That would be his supreme, most magnificent, final work of art.

Daiki opened the window and climbed onto the windowsill. Leaning half of his

body outside, he stood up. In his heart, just as an orchestra conductor waves his baton, he brandished his brush.

He began to sketch the black drawing his father had told him never to draw again. In the drawing was a tall, tall tower that reached up to the heavens. A tower that pierced the sky.

If I have no wings, then I'll just climb up instead.

He would become the boy on that fateful day, and he would feel as the boy had once felt, standing here one year ago. He had only been alive for 14 years, yet he had seen the end of the world.

Life is crap. He spat on all landscapes. Who would try to stop the boy's flight now?

"And now," Daiki said, "I, too, will fly."

Go to the extreme, to the highest height. Nobody can stop him now. Not even the harbinger of death, that shinigami.

Shinigami? He stopped, sweat pouring from everywhere on his body.

"...No... It was only a dream..."

He didn't even have to turn around to know.

—*Ring*.

"The death you yearn for... will not come like that. Didn't I tell you?"

The little girl stood there.



Momo was again clad in a flimsy, white, one-piece dress and red shoes, totally oblivious to the winter chill. She held the large sickle in her hand, and the black cat hovered at her side.

Her red lips parted as she spoke. "You can go ahead and die, but we have no schedule for you yet. So I can't take your soul to Heaven. Unscheduled souls are

rarely welcome. They get left in holding for a while, and sometimes, they're forgotten. You might end up drifting about in limbo for all eternity. In other words, you won't get to where you want to go."

"Hey, you get that, punk?" Daniel said haughtily. "Stop making trouble for us!"

"...What...?"

"Hm? What is it, punk?" the cat asked.

"Shut up, you!" Daiki barked suddenly.

Surprised by the loudness of Daiki's voice, Daniel skittered behind Momo, his fur standing on end.

"You show up all of a sudden, talking all this nonsense at me." Daiki came down from the windowsill and back into the room. He approached Momo angrily.

"Don't mess with my reality! Don't walk into my soul, stepping all over it with your dirty shoes!"

"....." Momo just stood there quietly.

Daiki's tirade continued. "You're nothing but a dream! There's no way you're real! So I'm not afraid of you! I'm not afraid!"

"I see... So what you're saying is, you are afraid."

The words took Daiki by surprise, and his composure began to falter.

"Is it me you're afraid of?" Momo asked. "Or... dying?"

"I'm not afraid to die! And I'm not afraid of you either! Compared to the pain of living, dying is nothing..."

This time, Momo spoke with a controlled, steady voice. "Then hurry up and die."

Strange that such power and intimidation could reside within such an innocent-looking child's gaze. Daniel, still cowering behind his mistress, collapsed with surprise.

But what was even more surprising to Daiki was that when he turned around,

he noticed the sad, almost pained expression on the girl's face. Her beauty, enough to take one's breath away, had now been marred by a heretofore unseen expression of emotion, of pain. Her eyes remained fixed on Daiki. He couldn't fathom why she would look at him so sadly.

"Dying is better than living, eh? Is that what you think?" Momo shook her head emphatically. Her voice tore through the air like pounding raindrops. "Don't be a fool. That's not possible. While taking so many lives, I've listened to the words of those who yearned to live. I've had to ignore their tears and hopeless smiles."

The sound of Momo's voice brought Daniel's composure back to form.

"Momo, don't make that face. You'll make me sad too. You don't need to get hurt over this guy..."

Momo gave Daniel a reassuring look and hugged him close to her breast. Then she faced Daiki again.

"But I want to die," the boy said.

"You die, and then what?"

"Then I'll become light," he explained. "A light that will shine forever."

"You can't."

"I can too!" he said adamantly. "Artists who died without ever hearing a single word of praise for their paintings while they lived... Their works are now worth an insane, astronomical sum. That's right. They achieved illumination! Only after they died did they shine brightly! They left a message that would remain for all eternity. So I'll die too, and I'll shine!"

"You're wrong about that," Momo disagreed.

"What's wrong?!"

Momo continued to look at Daiki. Her sad eyes quickly changed into something more pitying.

"People cannot shine by dying. The only reason they appear to shine is because they struggled so hard to live, and if they survived, they shone. Simply put, death is not the same as survival. What about you? Are you trying your

best at living?”

Daiki was unable to answer. The words cut deep.

The emotions he thought he had lost resurfaced. The heart buried within the cold piece of machinery he had built around himself began to throb with pain.

“One year ago,” Momo recounted, “I came here to claim the boy with whom you identify yourself. When he took his own life, the boy said, ‘This is what I choose.’ But he seemed to be in such pain. So lonely. Of course, it is a very sad thing... when people wish to die, yet at the same time they yearn to live.”

The words spilled from her lips and fell upon Daniel’s head, whom she still held close to her.

“Momo...” Daniel said, wistfully.

Daiki wanted to say so many things to her. *Why are you so sad? Why do you look at me with such sad eyes? Please don’t look at me with such pity!*

Instead, he shouted, “You have no right to look at me that way!”

Then he ran.

He ran past Momo and stumbled down the stairs.

The girl and the cat were left alone in the room.

“Momo, why do you bother with this guy?” Daniel asked.

“No real reason...”

“For a shinigami,” Daniel stated, “you think too much about humans.”

“Not really...”

“What is it that you’re trying to do here?” he asked.

“Nothing much...”

“Oh, please...” Daniel was quickly getting exasperated. “Don’t bother with him... But I guess that’s impossible. You *are* such a meddler, Momo.”

“...So you do understand after all.”

Momo held Daniel in front of her face, and he deftly stroked her cheek with his tail.

“You act tough, but you’re such a crybaby. If you keep getting involved with humans like this, the director will have a big fit, and you know it. What’s the use in extending his life anyway? It sure as hell won’t be my problem, ya understand?”

“Hoooh boy,” the girl said, as she sighed.



He was groping about in the dark. The Bengal-orange light was quickly fading.

Is that the exit, or is it this way?

The darkness spread out infinitely and he was left with no way of knowing which way was which. There was no light visible.

I can't see. I can't even see myself or what I've lost. What I've lost...

“D... Daiki-ku... Daiki-kun!”

Realizing he was being called, Daiki turned around. The man calling him was from the publishing company that was sponsoring his exhibition. He was still rather young, but already in a position of authority.

“What’s wrong? You’ve been out of it for a while now.”

The man wore a concerned expression, seeing Daiki completely devoid of concentration.

Daiki lied. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m a little tired...”

The man seemed satisfied with this answer. “Yes, well, it’s only a few days before the exhibition. After all, this is the starting point of your career as an artist.”

He viewed the surroundings with a faraway look in his eyes. This was Daiki’s exhibition gallery. Starting with the award-winning pieces that had inspired the exhibition, several of his canvasses were laid out all over the place.

They weren’t simply hung on the walls, but, considering Daiki’s youth, were laid out to a rather fashionable effect. The design reflected Daiki’s youthful generation.

That Daiki was young also made for good publicity. Smelling a hot item, the media would be swarming all over the gallery on opening day.

For the publishing company, there was no doubt this would make for perfect advertising. For the young man put in charge, this project was a chance for career advancement.

From the moment they had first met, Daiki immediately sensed an energy welling up within this man.

“Don’t worry,” the man gushed. “It will be a huge success. After all, your work is magnificent! In your method of incorporating light, I can see an individual style!”

The man spoke broadly, like the host of an infomercial. The line he’d just given was something he most likely had picked up from some critic. He probably had no idea what the artwork was truly worth. He simply went with the ebb and flow of the masses.

And besides, this publishing company had the blessings of the godly Ikuma Ichiyo. That had to have at least some influence on the exhibition. But privately speaking, the company still remained doubtful as to whether Daiki had any value or not.

Daiki viewed the man, as usual, with cold unfeeling eyes.

You don’t know the value of art, he thought. And you don’t understand my worth. Don’t talk as if you know.

That was always his opinion of the man. But on this day, the man’s words never even reached Daiki’s ears. He remained in a stupor. It was as if he couldn’t even tell where he was at this place and time.

“.....”

Why was he in this place? Why was he still alive? Why? Why...

“...That’s because you’re not meant to die yet.”

“What...?”

—*Ring.*

It was the girl's voice.

"...!"

He turned around, but neither she nor the black cat were there. He looked around and saw no trace of them. Was he hearing things?

No, he had definitely heard her.

The little girl was a shinigami, yet she showed such emotion.

Ever since he had run away from her that day, it felt as if his feet weren't planted firmly on the ground. He kept thinking of a reason for those sad eyes. The shinigami, who was supposed to bring death, was trying to prevent his. The girl's words, like rain soaking into parched earth, seeped into Daiki's soul.

Why did she show herself to him? And what was the reason for her sadness?

"I don't understand. I thought there was no reason to live, but I am still alive."

If she hadn't shown up, he would have become light.

"Why..." he continued to ask.

"Is something wrong?"

The man peered into Daiki's face quizzically. "It seems you aren't feeling well after all. We should call it a day."

"All right..." Daiki agreed meekly.

The man then tried to lead Daiki out through the exit. But...

"Oh..." The man suddenly stopped. Still in a stupor, Daiki continued walking. Unaware that the man in front of him had stopped, he bumped straight into the man's back. The man almost fell over, but somehow he kept his feet and began to move forward once more, hurrying toward the entrance.

"Ah, Ikuma-sensei!"

The man greeted and bowed deeply to the person who suddenly appeared there. The secretary opened the door, and in came... Ikuma Ichiyo.

“If you had sent word,” the flustered man declared, “I would have come to receive you!”

This sudden appearance caused sweat to form on the man’s brow. He was uncertain what to do next. However, Ichiyo lightly restrained the man with one hand and instead walked straight over to Daiki.

“How are things?” Ichiyo asked his son in an ordinary, albeit intimidating, tone of voice.

“E-everything’s fine, Father,” Daiki stammered.

“I see.”

Ichiyo’s appearance put Daiki in a quandary as well. Although the layout and decorations were already finished, it was still quite a while before the opening. Even though it was normal for his son to be here, it was out of the ordinary for one such as Ichiyo to make an appearance before opening night.

It’s not likely he’s worried about me. Well, he probably just wants to make sure my artwork doesn’t ruin the good name of Ikuma Ichiyo, Daiki thought.

As expected, Ichiyo spoke. “Then let me have a quick look. I’m a bit concerned about something...”

He couldn’t possibly have the time for this, yet here he was, troubling himself with his boy’s exhibition. A busy man like him must have plans for tomorrow as well. Daiki remembered that, before his father left to go abroad and after his return, he had been spending a lot of time locked up in his studio. He must be working on a new painting.

The publisher’s representative spoke, bowing deeply at the waist over and over. “If... if that’s the case, then I shall guide you.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” came Ichiyo’s unexpected reply. “Will the two of you excuse us?”

By “the two of you,” he meant the man and the secretary. Not willing to argue, the man wiped the sweat from his brow and dutifully went outside with the secretary. Then, without a word, Ichiyo began walking through the gallery. Half taken aback, Daiki followed behind.

—Ring... ring ring...



Daiki stared intently at Ichiyo's back. He was wearing a formal suit. For a man already in his 50s, his frame was solid and possessed character. This was the back of a world-renowned artist. How dignified his father looked compared to Daiki.

His back was like a massive wall that cut the world in half by itself.

I cannot overcome this wall. It is not allowed. I can only obey.

While Ichiyo looked at the paintings, he said nothing. Occasionally, he would concentrate on a painting and gaze at it with a sharpened glare.

"How is it, sir? Are you satisfied?"

He wanted to say that he had painted it all according to his father's instructions. For example, for the red in the painting that Ichiyo was studying right now, Daiki had been compelled to use a red-colored clay that could not be found in the city.

Or the angel painting, for that matter. He had wanted to portray it with a sad expression, but he had been forced to paint it with a joyful smile. Daiki had originally wanted to express a form of pain that was little more than hatred, yet now, it had become quite gentle, a warm picture. The irony was, in the end, he had received high praise for it.

The paintings, the colors, the forms. All of them were just as Ichiyo wanted. Daiki had obediently moved along the rails Ichiyo had laid down for him.

I've been running inside that tunnel for years now.

Ichiyo finally reached the final painting. It wasn't in Daiki's nature to wear a watch, so he didn't know how much time had elapsed, but it seemed like a very long period.

Although it was the last painting, it was a kind of practical joke. It was a crayon drawing, done before Daiki could even remember, when he had yet to develop either sketching or artistic skills.

It was a laughably exaggerated picture of the sky. The sky was a mishmash of blue and red and orange, and the sun was purple.

Daiki hadn't been aware this painting still existed, much less that it was being displayed. At first, he had protested, but the publishing company had told him, "This was the starting point for the artist, Ikuma Daiki." So they strong-armed him into displaying it.

Why they would want this ridiculously inept, meaningless thing displayed was beyond him. It was no longer possible to determine what kind of paper it was drawn on. It was a 1.4 meter square, a needlessly large drawing.

Yet here it was now, boldly standing as the last in line of several of Daiki's finest works. This drawing stuck out like a sore thumb from the rest of the artwork, and from the modern layout of the gallery as well.

Ichijo had been standing still in front of this painting for quite a while.

Daiki wanted to protest—his father would be barking up the wrong tree. It was the publishing company who had put this one up, not him.

"...This is ridiculous, isn't it?" Daiki managed to blurt out. "This one was from before I received your guidance, Father. But now it's different. I do what you tell me now, so..."

Daiki continued to belittle himself, but Ichijo silenced him.

"Daiki, why do you paint?"

It was an abrupt question. Daiki tried to answer simply, yet he could not answer at all. It was the first time anyone had ever asked him. Plus, Daiki didn't exactly know why he painted pictures in the first place.

He would probably be asked that again in newspaper and television interviews: "What is painting to you?"

In those cases, he would answer, "It is my soul." He would either say that or simply parrot a line from some artist whose book he had read. But this time it was different.

Daiki had only painted as he was told. For him to answer this question was impossible. Since he had never acted in accordance with his own free will, there

was no way he could answer it. If he had to give an answer, it would be—"I do it for you."

"...So you can't answer?" Ichiyo spoke softly. "That's why your painting is nonsense."

Daiki almost protested in response. He had a strong urge to say, "I painted according to your orders. So why are you saying this now? What I learned from you was how to paint by the numbers, how to win awards. If that's the case, then these are paintings without a soul, a pathetic attempt to copy Ikuma Ichiyo. And it was you who made me paint this way. If my paintings are nonsense, then so are yours!"

But his body refused to spit out these thoughts and emotions. Instead, he remained silent.

Ever since he was small he had trained himself not to display emotions that would defy Ichiyo. He would let them simmer and fester until they dissipated.

Daiki's words were practiced. "I am sorry."

Having heard those same words repeated over and over before, Ichiyo breathed out a sigh. In that same breath, out spilled words which evaded one's hearing. "...Not there yet...still a ways to go...almost... please..."

"What?" Daiki tried to make his father repeat the words, but Ichiyo just turned his back and walked out. His retreating back seemed smaller than usual.

Somehow, it almost seemed as if Ichiyo was crying. Something strange was happening. Little by little, things were becoming odd.

Why did he ask me that? Daiki wondered. Why was he being scolded for this old drawing now? Daiki could not understand anything.

But the one thing he was certain of was that there would be more of this, happening over and over like a broken record. It would just continue. An eternity of darkness and sadness.

He couldn't even see his shadow. The thing that had been stepped on was his heart.

—So that was it.

And on that same night, Ichiyo collapsed.



Ichiyo suffered a heart attack a few minutes after leaving Daiki's exhibition gallery and getting in his car. Grabbing his chest in pain, he was immediately taken to the hospital.

But now he was in a coma, unconscious.

Daiki felt nothing. He thought his emotions were malfunctioning completely. Leaning against the white hospital wall, he could feel the cold of the concrete seeping into his back.

Lying in the intensive care unit, it seemed that Ichiyo's condition was grave. People in charge of his business affairs paced back and forth in front of his room. They were already arguing about funeral arrangements and publishing rights after death, as if Daiki was not even there with them.

Visitors were not usually permitted in the intensive care ward, but they were allowing them—an indication that chances of recovery were close to zero.

Time passed, and everybody eventually left. As the hour grew late, one began to worry about the time, another about tomorrow's schedule. And so, one by one, they began to leave for home.

In the end, nobody was left. There wasn't anybody who truly cared for Ichiyo. In life and in death, power and talent alone don't amount to much. The people who gathered earlier were akin to zombies, swarming to a feast.

Daiki pitied his father and felt the sudden urge to see him. Perhaps his own feelings might now be assuaged. He approached the secretary who had been keeping vigil all this time.

He said, "I'll switch with you. You should get some rest."

And so Daiki stood by Ichiyo, lying there all alone.

The room was populated with exaggerated machines from which numerous

cords emerged. He saw the IV tubes attached to all parts of Ichiyo's body. In fact, it almost seemed as though the tubes were growing out of his body.

Daiki was taken aback. It looked like a body made up of machines. A robot.

So this is how it is to stand on the precipice of death, Daiki thought. He saw how wretched life was and how miserable it was to be forced to live. He now knew. But he had never expected that it would be this disgraceful.

The weak electronic spikes on the electrocardiogram, indicating heartbeats, flaunted the fact that Ichiyo's life was being sustained with the help of machinery. But the room was not busy with machine beeps and noises like it was in TV dramas. It was actually surprisingly quiet.

And for that reason, it seemed all too real. The reality he had sought was here.

So now he's going to die? Daiki wondered. *Is this what human death is?*

The thing that Daiki had been longing for was now here, staring him in the face. And he found it disappointing. Much too disappointing. He tried to deny that this was how death was, that this was what he had wanted. It couldn't be like this. How could the thing he wanted be like this?

That boy had shone so brightly, so should his father. But he didn't.

"Why is it all so ephemeral?" he wondered, with his face in his hands.

—*Ring*.

"That's because *this* is your reality."

The girl in white again stood next to Daiki.

"...?!" Taken by surprise, Daiki felt his knees almost buckle.

The black cat crossed in front of him and hopped onto Ichiyo's bed. As if searching for something, he curiously looked about Ichiyo, glancing this way and that.

"Y-you... what are you doing here?!" Daiki asked incredulously. He checked

and saw the door to the room was still shut. “How did you get inside...?”

“I told you,” Momo responded, “I’m a shinigami.”

“.....” Daiki refused to understand.

“Reality is painful...” Momo explained. “When you chase after illusions, they only slip through your fingers. And since you can’t understand that, I suppose there’s no greater irony.”

“So this... this is the reality I exist in...?” Daiki asked.

“Yes. You’ll understand that soon enough. I’m sure you will.”

“Okay, Momo,” Daniel interrupted. “It’s almost time.”

“All right,” Momo answered. “Now come on. Your father is calling.”

“What?”

The next thing he knew, a miracle was happening.

“...D... Daiki... Are you there...?”

Ichijo was regaining consciousness. He was calling out to Daiki in a parched voice. Here he was, the very same Ichijo whom the doctors proclaimed would not likely regain consciousness and whose prospects were pronounced as gloomy.

Daiki, wondering, looked to Momo. “...My god, did you... do this...?”

“Well, who knows?” She shrugged. She then looked straight at Daiki, as if to ask, *“What are you going to do now?”*

With a sigh, Daiki turned to face his father. Daniel obediently hopped off the bed and went to his mistress’s side.

“I’m here, Father...”

He seems so weak, Daiki thought as he peered down at his father.

Ichijo’s eyes moved towards the direction of the voice, confirming Daiki’s presence. Although his body was still physically weak, his voice gradually regained its power as he continued to speak.

“...Daiki... paint pictures...”

“...?”

He’s still insisting on that? Daiki thought incredulously. *Can’t he say something a bit more fatherly at a time like this?*

Daiki couldn’t believe his ears. His father was still forcing him to paint, even after belittling his work just a few hours earlier.

Ignoring his son’s cold stare, Ichiyo continued. “Do you remember...? You drew so many p-pictures with your first... crayon set...”

“?”

“And eventually,” Ichiyo struggled with the words, “y-you drew a big, big picture on the w-wall of my studio. You wore down your brand new crayons doing it... I-it was that big...”

Daiki couldn’t remember such a thing. He had always suppressed his memories, his reminiscences. Especially the ones that happened before he realized there was no light shining upon him.

“And... I... You know, Daiki... I scolded you. But... actually, I was truly happy. I was hopelessly envious...”

“...?” Daiki couldn’t believe his ears.

Ichiyo laughed with a gentle, relaxed voice. “I kept that first drawing of yours all this time and I actually wanted to exhibit it. You might think I’m just being a dumb parent...”

Questions kept racing through Daiki’s mind. *That last painting, he was the one who had it?! Was he the one who ordered the publishing company to display it?! Oh my God, that’s... that’s impossible!*

“Back then...” Ichiyo continued. “I saw light coming from within you. A ‘light’ that shone upon your painting. A light which I never had... It was a magnificent light... A light that shone so brilliantly.”

Surely his father was lying, Daiki thought. He was, by now, frantically upset. He knew that no such light shone from within him. Daiki was uncertain as to what his father was trying to say. How could he have light that the great Ikuma Ichiyo himself didn’t possess?

In the beginning, the boy had painted. He dirtied himself with paints and pencils and got covered in soot, but he had loved all of it. He loved it even if he was treated harshly, even if he wasn't acknowledged. He believed one day, if he continued painting, that his father would come to respect him. But that day never came.

The boy spent countless days worrying about what his father wanted from him. He did as he was told, creating pictures like a robot... No! He wasn't creating. He was copying, trying to mimic Ikuma Ichiyo.

Hearing his father's unexpected words, Daiki's emotions burst forth like water from a broken faucet. The emotions he had kept simmering inside—they never had dissipated, they had only been locked up. And now, after festering for years, they finally poured forth like a burst dam.

"But I have no talent! I can draw cookie cutter pictures and I can copy your style, but I can't surpass you! When I realized that, do you know what happened?! It was the end of the world for me! I thought there was a future, even if I followed the rails you laid out for me, but this is the end. Because of you! You were the wall that always stood in my way. To end like this—it's too pathetic! I have nothing left... And now you say you saw light in me?! I've always been in nothing but a dark tunnel to nowhere!"

His knees were about to buckle. He couldn't find strength anywhere in his body. He was nothing but an empty shell. But still, the father spoke softly to his son.

"No. It is not the end... When you drew that drawing of black smears... I realized how much pressure you've been under. But I believed in my own way of doing things... Just bear with it a little more... You will succeed and become a light that will shine for the entire world..."

Ichiyo was desperate not to nip Daiki's talent in the bud. He had only wanted his son to have an environment in which he would not fold under any obstacle, to continue bravely in the face of his artwork.

"At this rate... you'll only be an artist by virtue of the fact that you are my son. And even then, you will be just one of the faceless many... But know that you have the talent to create something never seen before, something nobody can

imitate... But if you remain the way you are now, you will never be recognized... That's how conservative the world is... But if this exhibition is a success... If you can win recognition from society, only then will you be able to create the things you want to create... You'll be able to paint as your heart desires...!"

What Ichiyo wanted was for society to notice Daiki as soon as possible, so he had him paint by the numbers, forcing him to learn the basics. He knew it was painful for the boy, but it was all done with an eye looking towards the future. Daiki's future.

Against Daiki's will, he had painted pictures in the style of his father. To an artist such as Daiki, this was unbearable. But even copying was only possible after acquiring basic skills, and so it was a shortcut in the process of obtaining social recognition.

The black sketch Daiki had drawn on the day he met the shinigami, Ichiyo had torn apart in a fit of anger. To be more precise, it had most likely been born out of resentment.

"At the time... I realized how much pain I've put you through. To think that that warped picture was your soul... I believe it was an image of your death... wasn't it? ...Don't think about dying. You're still young. You don't even know how to live yet."

Ichiyo's words and feelings rocked Daiki's body with a mighty force. Here was Ichiyo, on the brink of death, trying to stop *him* from dying.

"But... I have nothing left...!" Daiki protested. "No talent, no reason for existence. I am without a reason to live... I want to shine... as my last act... I want to shine... I want to know eternity... What should I do? I'm not wanted in this world. So teach me, like you always do, Father..."

Hearing these words, Ichiyo's soul trembled. They were spoken as if by someone walking with his head down, his energy totally exhausted.

Even now, Daiki continued to wonder why everyone looked at him with such sad eyes.

"...Live. And paint... Eventually, you will reach a place I myself never found. You'll understand how happy it is to be able to paint as your heart desires. Look

at yourself carefully. The reason you cannot see the light is because you yourself *are* the shining light. You can shine that light on the world that I have lived in, and now in the world that you continue to live in... Just as you have always been a light to me... My Daiki..."

Finally able to say what he had wanted to say to his son for the longest time, Ichiyo reached out his hand. As if to plead to the heavens, his large hand grasped Daiki's small, trembling hand. A comforting warmth traveled from the father's hand to the son's. It was his father's warmth.

"...Father..."

—*Ring.*

At that moment, without warning, the energy suddenly drained from Ichiyo's body. Like a string being unraveled, Ichiyo's hand slipped from Daiki's.

"Father...?"

Thud, it went, like a soulless doll. His arm dangled over the bed, unmoving.

"Father? Father!"

Ichiyo no longer responded.

"Father, what's wrong?!"

But it was not his father who answered Daiki's pleas.

"—He ran out of time."

It was the messenger of death, Momo.



The girl swung the large scythe, as if in a dance, and cut countless arcs high up in the air. In the night sky, only the golden moon and the stars shone.

She was about to deliver a soul. She shook her hair as if in a trance. It was a breath-takingly mysterious yet pure dance.

The black cat spread his bat-like wings and flitted about the girl, in

synchronicity with her movements.

Then, twirling the raised scythe, she cut a swath through the air. There was a flash. And with it, the soul and body were separated.

In the very end, the soul spoke.

“I’m sorry... but I can go now without having lost what is most precious to me. Thank you...”



Daiki felt like he could go on watching forever if nothing prevented him.

Perhaps all he would see would be stars twinkling in the clear night sky. But he was left wondering what it was that gripped his hand, what it was he had held. He’d lost a lot, yet wondered exactly what it was he had lost.

—Ikuma Ichiyo had departed this world.

Daiki had never known, but Ichiyo had suffered from heart disease. He met the end not as a great painter, but as a father.

At that moment, at the very end, Daiki finally realized how much love he had been immersed in.

Ikuma Ichiyo, the man, was a very socially inept person. On the other hand, Ikuma Ichiyo, the artist, could speak of art eloquently. But as a man, he could not find even the simplest words to express his thoughts to his own child.

When he discovered within Daiki a talent that could transcend his own, he was overjoyed. As a father, he worked hard to develop that talent. Ichiyo had seen countless youths, no matter how talented and award-winning, be manipulated by adults, their talent extinguished like shooting stars.

So he was extremely hard on Daiki. But behind closed doors, like on the day Daiki had won his first award or on the night his exhibition was decided, the father toasted the son’s success in private.

Although it was against doctors’ orders, he was simply too overjoyed to stop. It was all born out of love for his son. It was a father’s clumsy feelings for his

son, that was all.

“Father...”

Daiki’s voice echoed around the empty room. It was only now, after he was gone, that Daiki realized how deep his father’s love was for him. He didn’t know how to accept it.

He was standing absent-mindedly in his father’s studio. The place still smelled of his father. He could almost see Ichiyo there, sitting in front of a canvas, creating a miracle. The room was smothered by the smell of oil paints and varnish. These paints, no longer used, were arranged in perfect order. It was painful to the point of being unbearable.

—*Ring.*

That bell ringing again. He would probably remember his father from now on every time he heard a bell ring.

And that boy’s poem.

The window was open. The sun, low in the sky, spread its rays. The light was painfully blinding, enough to compel one to shut one’s eyes. But he would never shut them again. In the face of blinding light, he’d never been aware of his own.

“I’ll look straight ahead from now on,” he told himself.

The curtains swayed in the cold February wind. Emerging, as if from a fog, were Momo and Daniel.

She was a shinigami. Delivering death to Ichiyo, she had come to claim his soul.

Ichiyo had known his death was near. So he had rushed to finish his overseas exhibition and come home. In the end, he finally showed his tears to Daiki. He did it to make Daiki face forward. Towards his future.

Normally, a human cannot see a shinigami. But Daiki was powerfully

conscious of Ichiyo, and Ichiyo felt powerfully for Daiki. The scent of death, which he had thought was his own, was actually Ichiyo's. In desiring death, Daiki had come into contact with death and was able to meet and speak with Momo and Daniel.

"What is it?" Daiki asked. "I thought you already took Father."

"Yes."

"Then you shouldn't have any more business with me!" Daiki said harshly.

"But... I'm sorry."

She was crying. She was a shinigami, yet she cried with such an unbearable expression on her face. Slowly, like traces of light, warm tears ran down her cheeks.

"Why are you apologizing?" Daiki asked.

"...To be honest, I wanted to give you more time to talk with your father. But that day, it took all I had to extend the time he had left..."

"Yeah, but..." Daniel interrupted, "because of that, Momo got yelled at by the director! It's against department regulations for a shinigami to deliberately extend the scheduled time of death. Not only that, but she revived his consciousness and allowed him to talk too! You did all that for this ungrateful human, Momo!"

"Daniel, you don't need to bring that up." Momo pinched the cat's mouth, reproaching him.

"Owwwwwwww! I'm sorry, Momo!"

Satisfied, Momo released the cat, who promptly pressed his paws to his aching mouth and then breathed hard, forcing air back into his lungs.

Daiki somehow found the sight very funny. "Ha ha ha ha..." The sound was like that of someone who hadn't enjoyed a laugh for a long time. "I see. Thank you, Momo."

He felt as if he understood the reason for her tears now. Momo was not crying because she was sad. She cried because she had sensed what was happening in Ichiyo and Daiki's hearts and had known something sad was about

to befall them. Later, she cried in place of Ichiyo, who could no longer shed tears.

“Oh, I forgot. Oh, oh...”

Without even bothering to wipe her tears, Momo brought out a painting from the back of the studio. Behind her trotted Daniel, who left behind a set of red footprints. It seemed that he had stepped on a tube of paint that Ichiyo had forgotten to put away.

It was such a pleasing scene. Daiki found it hard to believe this little girl was a shinigami. In fact, quite the opposite, she somehow made one feel all warm inside.

“Here, take this...”

Seeing what was in Momo’s hands, Daiki swallowed hard. His chest felt as if it was bound. It was a tight, constricted pain.

Momo held an oil painting. In the painting, a young child was laughing.

The young child was... Daiki.

Momo spoke gently and quietly. “Your father worked on this until the very end. He asked me to give this painting to you. I announced his death to him, and when he accepted it, he hurried to finish this painting. He wanted to celebrate the start of your new journey, and he wanted to leave you something...”

The brushstrokes, the use of light, all of it seemed to lovingly embrace the smile. The colors shone brilliantly, more than in any of his other works. If he had devoted every last moment of his life to this one painting, he would not have regretted it.

Droplets of warm water slid down Daiki’s cheeks and fell onto the painting. The still-drying oils on the canvas mixed with the tears and rolled down as one. He cried for the first time since Ichiyo’s passing. Like a helpless child, he cried buckets of tears.

Seeing this, Momo began to cry again as well. “I think your father always held a vision of you as a smiling child within him... after all...”

She could not finish the sentence... The words only came out as tears.

“Stop crying, Momo,” Daniel scolded her. “It’s unsightly.”

The cat slapped his mistress’s red shoes repeatedly with his tail in an effort to get her to stop. It was his way of comforting her. She smiled at his efforts.

Come to think of it, she was such a small, fragile thing. She had thin arms and legs, a childish voice, and a cherubic face. And though she spoke like an adult, she was still a little child.

She was a strange shinigami, she who cried over the souls she had taken. That she didn’t wipe her tears away may have been her way of showing respect for the dead. Or perhaps her way of putting up a bold front.

“Thank you.” Daiki gently patted this funny little shinigami on the head, her tears still trickling down her cheeks.

“You’re such a crybaby,” added Daiki. “And you’re such a meddler.”

The little girl—still with tears in her eyes— smiled a beautiful smile.

The artist Ikuma Daiki’s exhibition was a huge success. His style of reproducing light, as if it actually existed on the painting, received especially high praise and attention.

At the very end of the exhibition hall hung two paintings.

One was entitled, “From a Son to His Father.”

The other was entitled, “From a Father to His Son.”

The smile his father showed that day, his warm voice and his large, guiding hands were all portrayed by Daiki in vivid color.

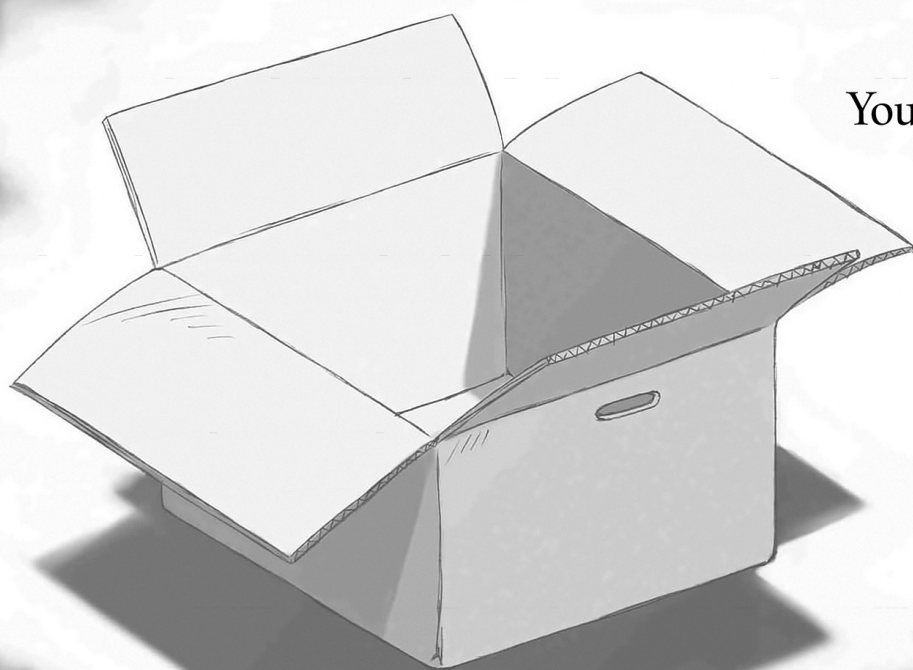
—He painted very well.

I feel the light — fin.



II

Your Voice: Echo



The warmth of spring is like the warmth of the heart.



It rained again.

It was a furious downpour, with rain bouncing off the hard, cold asphalt. It was a deluge savage enough to grind away at the earth.

At this park, one could usually hear the voices of children, even in the evening. But tonight it was dark, and, in the pouring rain, one could barely see a few feet ahead, much less anyone on the street.

Up in the night sky, strobes of lightning crackled. The lightning streaked across the low sky and was blinding. The rumbling noise that followed was deep enough to cause a roar in the ears. The thunder shook the boy's little body.

Inside the cardboard box he carried, the contents rustled noisily, in startled reaction to the rumbling.

The boy wore a light blue raincoat. From under his hood, he peered down at the box. A puddle of water had formed on the plastic sheet he had placed on top of the box to protect the contents from the rain.

"...You... It's all your fault... If you hadn't been around..."

The boy looked left and right.

"....."

Steeling his resolve, he placed the box in a location that would be easily spotted by passersby. He would abandon it in the park, yet the boy thought of it as a final act of kindness.

"...I... I..."

The boy's shoulders trembled. Perhaps it was the lightning, perhaps there was a deeper reason, but his resolve began to crumble.

Whatever was inside the box continued to struggle.

"It... It's all your fault... That's why I..."

"...So you're saying you're not at all to blame?"

—*Ring.*

Not even the pouring rain could obscure the sound. The ringing of the bell and her voice echoed within the boy's mind.

"What...?"

He thought his heart was going to pop out. There, in front of him, stood a little girl dressed in white. She stood next to the cardboard box he had just put down.

In the rain, her white hair and red shoes seemed to glow faintly. Stranger still, the girl was floating in mid-air. And if one looked closely, one would notice an elliptical area around the girl, which shielded her from the rain.

For an instant, he thought she was a ghost. But immediately, her appearance reminded him of something else. It was too fantastic and unbelievable, but she looked very much like a fairy he had once seen on TV. Remembering this, he became somewhat entranced by her and didn't even notice the black cat by her feet.

The cat's black body blended in with the darkness, but his eyes were like golden moons. He wore a rather conspicuous-looking red collar around his neck, with a bell attached to it. His tail pointed straight up into the night sky; only the tip of it was white. Glaring at the boy, the cat opened its mouth and spoke.

"Were you planning to kill it?" The cat's voice sounded like that of a young child, about the same age as the boy.

"Eek!" The boy's knees buckled under him in fear and surprise.

Th-the cat spoke?! he thought, unbelieving.

The boy fell backwards and landed on his butt in the rain-drenched mud. His cotton shorts immediately became soaked with water, and a cold sensation shot through his body.

"Daniel, come." The little girl beckoned to the cat. She appeared to be a bit

younger than the boy, yet her voice, although childlike, sounded strangely like an adult's.

"Hrrnph!" the cat snorted. Shooting one last glance at the boy, he scampered over to the girl.

The girl crouched and scooped up the water that pooled atop the plastic sheet covering the box.

"If it continues raining like this, what will happen to this poor 'child?'" she murmured. She seemed to be speaking to the black cat beside her and, at the same time, addressing the young boy.

"I mean, if you leave him like this, he'll surely die."

The black cat rapped his forepaw against the side of the box. "*Heeey*, you alive in there, pal?"

In response, the contents of the box rustled.

"He seems to still have some fight left, Momo," the cat told the girl, craftily displaying a coy yet happy expression.

"But if you leave him like this, there's no telling," the girl said somberly.

The cat accosted the boy. "You stupid punk! What were you planning to do with my relative here?"

This time the black cat bared its teeth and glared angrily at the boy with golden eyes.

"....."

The boy finally understood what they were talking about. Besides the rain and mud, a sticky layer of sweat gushed forth and drenched his body further.

"Wh-what the *hell* are you guys?!" he asked in a panic.

The term, spoken in desperation, was an apt description in this case. He could not find an excuse to explain his actions to the strange little girl and her cat. The weight of his crime grew heavier on his little shoulders. He had lost his resolve once, so he'd shut away his emotions. But he now found it weakening again. "Hate" was transforming back to "love." So the boy dashed in between the girl

and her cat and ran for his life.

“Th-there’s no way I’d abandon him! I-I just thought I’d leave him for a while, that’s all!” he cried, holding the box and running at full speed towards the exit.

What’s going on here?! he thought frantically. What the hell is going on?! It’s not my fault! It’s not my fault. I... I...

And then it happened. He heard it. “Her” voice.

He looked behind him in panic. But there was nothing there to provide form to what he was searching for. As for the girl and cat, they were no longer visible.

“Am I imagining things?” he asked himself.

It was a soft voice, like feathers. He could almost hear it even now. But she wasn’t there. He would never hear that voice again.

“She’s gone...” he said to himself. “Why? Why...?”

From inside the box, a small, weak voice cried out. “Meow.”

It was a troublesome burden, left behind by *her*.



Back when they were still together...

“Hey, you two are dating, aren’t you?!” a classmate teased.

“Shut up! Just go away! It’s got nothing to do with you anyway!”

Seto Kota yelled with all his might at his male classmates who teased him. He swung at them just for good measure, roaring mightily. But he missed, resulting in even more teasing.

“Coooo, coooo!” his classmates teased before running off.

“Jeez, those guys,” Kota complained irritably. “Every day, each and every day... They really piss me off.”

Red in the face and with steam almost coming out of his ears, he ran his hand through his closely cropped, chestnut-colored hair, bleached against his will by

his older sister in junior high.

“Don’t worry about what those stupid guys say.”

Although he *was* worried, Kota put on a bold front while in the presence of the girl standing behind him now. The one he had been protecting.

Wearing a light yellow dress, the girl spoke in a voice as soft as fur on a newborn kitten.

“It’s fine,” Makihara Mai said reassuringly, and rewarded the boy with a smile as bright as sunflowers.

She had a rather mature-looking face for a girl her age. In fact, Mai acted a bit more grown-up than the other girls in her class. She herself wanted to hurry up and become an adult fast.

Kota, on the other hand, would have preferred being a kid as long as possible.

Standing at eye level with Mai, he peered into her eyes. They were clear and sharp. Mai used to be the taller one. Though he had not yet entered puberty, Kota had started growing, and now they were about the same height.

Realizing this, Kota basked in a sense of superiority, thinking, *I’ll shoot past her in no time*. But once he got used to looking at her eye-to-eye, he no longer bothered to brag about it. He realized there was nothing to be gained in bragging. *After all*, he would reason, *we’re still the same age...*

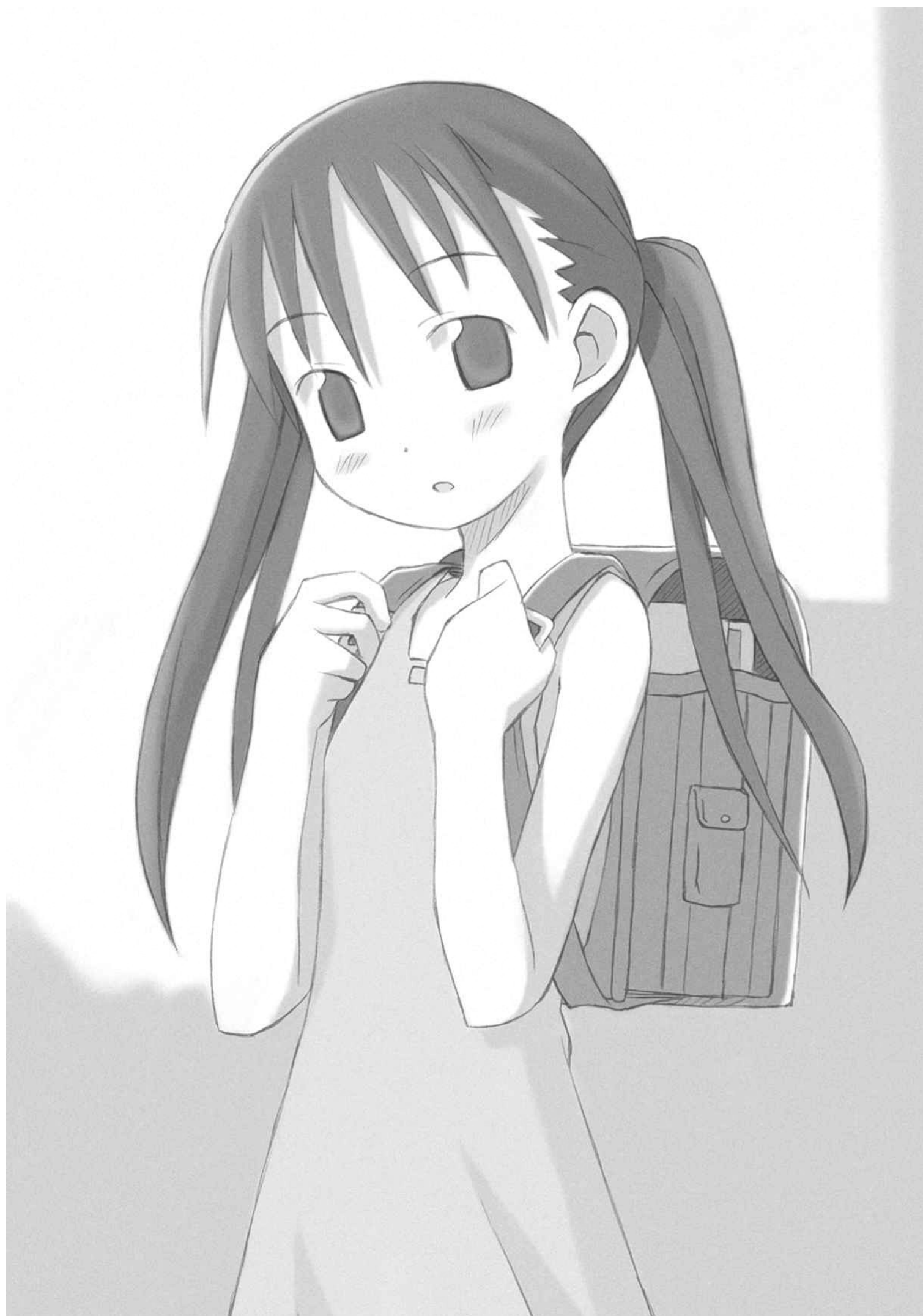
“You don’t need to try so hard, Kota,” Mai continued, bringing the boy out of his reverie. “You don’t have to walk home with me.”

“Well, that’s because you... I mean, it’s lunch break... Er, what I mean to say is... Oh, f-forget it! Just forget it! I’m walking home with you because I want to!”

Not quite realizing the implications of the words he had haphazardly blurted out, Kota felt suspicious about Mai’s quickly reddening cheeks. He hurriedly dismissed the thought and began walking.

“Come on,” he urged. “Let’s go.”

“Okay,” she replied.



It was lunch break and Mai needed to go to the nurse's office first. Kota was greatly concerned for her. Especially under the circumstances.

Mai walked behind Kota. Her soft hair, tied in pigtails, bounced rhythmically as she walked. She felt warm inside. He may not have expressed himself gracefully, but she appreciated his warm feelings.

Later they would walk home together. And that's when they would run into "him."



His eyes were the color of blue skies. They were a very clear, almost transparent blue.

"Meow," he cried out in a sweet voice. He was alone and had been placed in a worn-out cardboard box, with a towel inside for bedding. This was his home when they first found him.

"So cute!" Mai said, looking sweetly at him.

Mai lifted the tiny kitten from the box. He was a tortoiseshell cat with strong features. She took extra care to hold the trembling kitten as gently as possible.

The usual "please give me a home" sign was nowhere to be found. This was a back street, away from the more populated residential areas. It didn't seem like whoever left it hoped it would be found.

On the other hand, the street was often used by grade schoolers as a shortcut. Someone aware of that might have thought that a child would pick the cat up out of curiosity.

In any case, it was Kota and Mai who had discovered him. Although Kota had no way of sensing this at the time, it was indeed a very momentous encounter for both of them. But instead, Kota thought it was only going to be a bit problematic.

Mai continued to hug the kitten and showed no signs of letting go.

Hmmm. This could be trouble... Kota thought.

He felt a stinging pain on the side of his head. It was a muscle memory of his

mother's fist, during a similar incident.

Six months before, Kota and Mai had found another kitten in an almost identical situation. The two of them had casually taken the cat home, but were both scolded severely by their parents. At the Seto household, Kota had been reprimanded by his mother.

"There's no way you're going to take care of it properly," she had scolded.

When Kota had retorted that this wasn't true, he was reminded of the time he allowed a Mississippi red-ear turtle to die by leaving it out under the hot sun for two days. He had resented being reminded of that, but all he got for his angry shrieking was a knuckle sandwich from his mother. The result: Kota loses via knockout.

Next, they had headed towards the Makihara household. But, of course, they wouldn't allow the cat to be kept as a pet either. Their reason, however, was different from that of the Setos.

Mai's mother was concerned about her daughter's health. She suffered from childhood asthma. The symptoms had appeared soon after Mai entered the fourth grade.

One night, she suffered an attack and the Makiharas ran through the night, carrying their daughter. They dashed into a hospital emergency room, but were turned away because there was no children's physician present.

They met the same rejection at the next hospital.

With the possibility of death looming, the couple desperately banged on the door of a small clinic.

They were finally admitted. Mai somehow managed to survive.

Because of that incident, her parents were very sensitive to Mai's physical condition. So the possibility of having a pet was never even considered. Mai fully understood her parents' feelings. But when Kota saw Mai's mother's pained expression, he realized the seriousness of Mai's condition for the first time.

Feeling helpless, the two of them had returned the kitten to where they had found it. Trying to comfort Mai as she cried, Kota had fought back his own tears.

After a while, though, Kota completely forgot how he had felt at that moment. Males—whether they are boys, teenagers, or full-grown men—will always be dense. Perhaps it is because they are emotionally weak. Perhaps they choose to forget rather than be crushed by painful emotions.

But women are different. Their hearts are so sensitive and just a little bit stronger. This is probably why little girls grow up faster than little boys.

And Mai was about to grow up much faster than young Kota. She herself wanted to, and perhaps her illness and the environment she was in spurred her to do so.

Even if half a year had already passed since the kitten incident, Mai still had not forgotten her feelings. She often wondered what happened to that kitten. She wanted to know if someone had rescued it and if it was living happily ever after.

“I’m sorry,” she had wanted to say. “I couldn’t give you a home. I’m so sorry. I’m still a child. I’m really sorry.”

Mai projected the memory of that kitten from long ago onto this kitten, which she now held firmly in her arms.

“We can’t keep it anyway,” reasoned Kota. “So let’s just hurry up and go home.”

Mai did not respond and continued holding the kitten.

Kota spoke in a troubled tone. “I mean, we can’t do anything about it, y’know. We can’t have pets at either your house or mine.”

He tried to reason with her, but it wasn’t working. As he wondered what to do next, Mai suddenly spoke up.

“This kitten is asking us to rescue it.”

“Huh?” Kota asked. “What are you talking about?” There was no possible way for her to understand what the cat was saying.

“I do know,” she answered, reading his thoughts. “I understand clearly what he’s saying.”

She spoke to him in a clear voice. “This kitten is asking me to save him,” she explained. “So I want to save him. After all... he’s just like me...”

Kota didn’t understand what Mai was saying. But he could somewhat perceive the painfully serious look on her face. He knew it was never going to work. If they took it home, he was likely to get slugged by his mom again. Just thinking about that hurt. He was willing to bet she could crack his skull in two. His mom, after all, had brute strength.

What should I do...? he asked himself.

He glanced over at Mai as he was thinking things over and noticed the pained expression on her face. He wanted to ask her why she was looking at him like that, but couldn’t say the words.

He finally blurted out, “Aggh! All right, already! I’ll hide it in the shrine near my house, okay?! It’ll be all right... probably. There’s hardly anybody who goes there anyway. It’ll probably work out!”

Hearing the suggestion, her eyes brightened and her face relaxed into a smile.

“But... y-you shouldn’t touch that cat too much, you know...” Kota added.

“Okay. I know! Thank you, Kota!”

Kota felt anxious, and he had absolutely no idea what to do next.



“Can’t we just give it some milk?” he asked.

“Nooooo,” she said.

“Why not?”

“It says so in this book,” she explained.

“Hey, why do you have so many books anyway?”

“I bought them before,” she stated.

“Before what?”

“Does it matter?” she asked.

Mai had prevented Kota from giving the kitten milk he had brought from home. Her handbook, entitled *How to Be a Good Pet Owner (Cat Version)*, strongly advised against it. The book was opened to the pages describing how to take care of your kitten.

Of course, Mai had bought this book just after that day half a year ago. The events of that day had left a deep impression on her.

There were no signs of anybody near the shrine. It was just as Kota described. Situated a bit far from the residential areas and up a long flight of stairs, it was the perfect spot to hide a kitten. They concealed the cardboard box behind the shrine, as an extra precaution to keep it hidden from people.

Mai tended to the kitten diligently, all the while holding the book in her free hand while she was at it. Kota, on the other hand, had no expertise in these matters and was left to play sparring partner to the playful kitten. This was how they divided the responsibilities.

Suddenly, Mai spoke up.

“*Blue* is good.”

“Huh? What is?” Kota asked, startled.

“You know, the kitten’s name,” Mai said. “We haven’t decided yet.”

“Why does it have to be ‘Blue?’”

“Look.” Mai lifted the kitten and turned his face towards Kota.

“Meow.”

Kota couldn’t tell if the kitten was happy or upset, but the kitten, now named Blue, meowed.

“His eyes,” she explained, “aren’t they pretty? So blue and clear... like the sky. That’s why I named him *Blue*, for the sky. Nice, isn’t it?”

Kota nodded with hardly any interest. “I guess so,” he shrugged.

Noticing his lack of enthusiasm, Mai puffed out her cheeks and told him, “Come on, straighten up! You’re a father now!”

“Huh? Wh-what are you talking about?!”

“I’m the mom,” she patiently explained. “And you’re the dad, Kota. And Blue is our child!”

She smiled shyly, her cheeks beginning to redden.

“Huh? Whaaaaat?!”

Kota was still just a child, but being called “dad,” he suddenly felt this huge burden of responsibility. He had not put much thought into any of this. It was as if he had to force himself to tighten his very loose belt.

Under the burden of his new responsibility, he said, “Then I guess I’ll just have to go ahead and do it!”

Having said that, he felt energy bubbling up within him.

And so, this very young “husband and wife” set out on the difficult road of raising a child.



The two of them, before they went to school, would leave the house early and head to the shrine to take care of Blue. After school, they would go directly to see Blue.

Kota got so worked up about it he would even leave school during lunch break to go and see the kitten. But after doing so a few times, one of the girls in his class tattled to the teacher and he was severely reprimanded. But still, he would not talk about Blue even if it killed him. Afterwards, he cornered the tattletale and made her cry. Of course, he was scolded for that too.

As reckless as Kota’s actions were, he knew exactly what he was doing. The boy had his own beliefs about the situation and thought the things he did were all for the good. Although he eventually came to love Blue, first and foremost in his mind was not to burden Mai too much.

Kota decided in his heart that he had to protect her. Mai looked so sad. Her parents looked so pained. He resolved, with a determination only a child could muster, that he would never let them be so sad again.

So when his classmate Saiki asked him, “Kota, wanna go play PerFree at my

house? Everybody's gonna be there and there'll be a tournament."

PerFree was a popular card game also known as "Perfect Freedom." It was all the rage with kids at school. Kota had been spending almost all of his allowance on it.

"It... It's okay," he stammered. "I've got things to do. Sorry."

Kota stood firm in resisting temptation. But Saiki was dissatisfied and continued badgering him.

"Jeez... Well, you're always playing with Makihara anyway."

"It's not like we're playing..." Kota tried to explain.

"Fine, whatever," Saiki said. "I'm not asking you anymore. If you want to be with Makihara so much, then you guys can just go and get married!"

It was a childish taunt, born of childish jealousy. Saiki had a general sense of why Kota was always with Mai. After all, Kota and Saiki had been the best of friends and were always playing together. But since Mai became ill, Kota spent all of his time with her.

Saiki knew a bit about the situation, but nonetheless, he felt as if a girl had taken away his best friend. Especially now. Just as soon as school ended, the two of them would disappear together. The entire class was having fun spreading rumors about Kota and Mai. To Saiki, it was extremely annoying.

If Kota had just continued playing with him, Saiki thought, he would never have gotten teased like this. So Saiki had tried to help his friend out by inviting Kota to play several times. But Kota's answer was always "no."

Finally, Saiki got upset. In his heart, he only wanted to be friends like they used to. But instead, he found himself always yelling at Kota.

"Sorry..." Kota softly murmured, watching the retreating back of his former best friend.

It was a very lonesome feeling.

Blue was being playful, but his father, Kota, did not smile as he normally did.

Every day, Blue would get stronger and stronger. For Kota and Mai, watching

his progress was pure joy.

But on this day, Kota did not smile. The reason was because of his argument with Saiki at school. Since then, whether in the classroom or passing each other in the hallway, they would avoid each other. Even if, truth be told, what they really wanted was only to talk and play.

Sensing this, Mai pretended to be casual about it and remarked, “Why don’t you play with Saiki-kun once in a while?”

“It’s okay,” Kota said. “It doesn’t matter. Who cares? I don’t want to play with that guy anyway.”

He was obviously putting on a brave front. Although he seemed angry, Kota’s eyes were cloudy and seemed about to burst into tears at any moment.

Not knowing what to say, Mai tried to pick Blue up. And then it happened.

“Mai...? H-hey!” Kota realized something was wrong with Mai. Her face was twisted in pain. She was having an attack and was unable to breathe normally.

“Hold on!” Kota pleaded. He quickly pulled Blue away from Mai and opened the pouch dangling from her bag. He pulled out her medicinal spray.

“Here!”

He pressed the inhaler to her mouth. In an attempt to help her feel better even with the tiniest of deeds, Kota let her put her weight against his chest while he rubbed her back. After a while, she began to calm down.

Kota had seen her suffer an attack several times. He had been taught how to deal with it by her mother. He had promised to protect her.

“Are you okay?” Kota said softly.

“...Yes...” she managed to say.

“Did you take your medicine at noon today?” he asked.

“.....”

“You didn’t? Look here...”

“But when fourth period ended, I was sleeping in the nurse’s office...” she tried to explain.

“Jeez...” Kota sighed.

After a few moments’ silence, with eyes downcast, she apologized.

“Why are you apologizing to me?” Kota asked sulkily.

Before, Mai would never have apologized like this. No matter if it was a boy or someone older, she would unflinchingly stand up for herself. But she had somehow developed a habit of apologizing. It was because her health was suffering.

She believed she had become a burden to a great many people around her because of her illness. Of course, there was no way Kota would ever think she was troubling him.

But her sense of responsibility would not relieve her of these thoughts. She hated being weak. Yet despite that, she only got weaker. She wanted to be strong, and so eventually grew to hate herself as she became weaker. Her strength made her weak.

Kota didn’t like seeing Mai so weak. But he would not hate her, he could not. He only wanted to smile with her and be himself around her.

The two of them fell quiet. As if mirroring their mood, the wind stopped blowing, rendering the world completely silent.

“Meow.”

Blue’s voice, though innocent-sounding, seemed deafening amidst the quiet.

“...I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“Like I said, don’t apologize.”

“But...” she protested.

She wanted to apologize for being weak.

“It’s okay...” he said. “You’re you, Mai.”

As usual, Kota didn’t particularly understand what he was saying, but his words reached Mai’s heart and gave her an irreplaceable joy. She smiled and decided to stop complaining. After all, her heart felt so warm now. She loved him, he was so important to her. Shyly, Mai squeezed Kota’s hand.

“H-hey! Mai! Th-that’s embarrassing!” Kota protested in a panic.

“There’s nobody here but you and me,” Mai laughingly told him.

“B-but...! Well, you know, Blue’s watching!”

“It’s okay,” she explained. “We’re his mommy and daddy.”

“Y-yeah, but...”

“Then just for a little bit longer,” she pleaded.

“Just for a little bit... Okay...” he said, giving in.

“...Thank you...”

It was a thank you full of various feelings. The warmth of his hand made her feel that she could be strong. She didn’t want to let go. Ever.

—*Ring.*



On that day, Mai left school early to go to the hospital to be examined.

“Please take care of Blue,” she asked of Kota.

Kota pounded his chest in response. “Leave it to me!”

And so, Kota was left to take care of Blue after school by himself. As soon as homeroom ended, Kota dashed out of the classroom as always. Kota was completely unaware of Saiki, who watched him leave with a complicated expression.

Today, since Mai was not here, he had to make sure Blue was taken care of properly. After all, he was the father. He had to do this and that, and think about this and that too. Kota was worked up even more intensely than usual.

But he soon discovered something that knocked the wind from his sails. Blue was not where he should be.

Although he didn’t know how to whistle, he pursed his lips and tried cheerfully, peering into the cardboard box. But Blue was not there.

“B-Blue?”

He turned the box over, but nothing came tumbling out.

“Blue!”

He called out, but there was no answer. The wind rustled and rocked the trees behind the shrine. He tried not to think about it. Especially since lately, Blue seemed to be overflowing with so much energy.

When they first found him on the back street, Blue had been weak, but thanks to Kota and Mai’s devotion, he was now bursting with energy. Well, actually, he had gotten a little too energetic lately and was becoming a handful. He was interested in everything and would chase and pounce on anything that moved.

At first, he had been frightened of the soccer ball Kota kicked around. But as he got used to it, he would chase it everywhere. He seemed especially interested in butterflies and falling leaves, anything that fluttered in the air.

This was a problem. If he had chased a butterfly or something into the woods, it wouldn’t be easy to find him. Kota remembered the painful memory of going into these woods to look for homed and stag beetles and getting lost while he was looking. When you went in there, you discovered how dark and large it actually was.

“Blue!” he continued calling out. But still, no answer.

“Are you serious...?”

He looked into the woods and let loose a sigh. “Dang it! Bluuuuuuuuuuue!!” Kota yelled out loud, feeling desperate.

And then...

“Meow!”

He heard the voice. It didn’t come from the woods. It was directly behind him.

“Huh?” he asked, puzzled.

Now that the prospect of going into the woods was eliminated, Kota somehow felt disappointed. He turned around.

“Meow.”

Their eyes met. Blue cocked his head in puzzlement. The cat was directly

behind him. Plopping down in a seated position, he looked up at Kota. He had gotten close to the boy without him ever knowing. He must have heard Kota calling and come up from somewhere in the distance.

“Jeez, my goodness...”

Relieved, Kota crouched to pick Blue up.

“Meow.”

Blue slipped away from him.

“Hey, Blue.”

He reached down again.

“Meow.”

But the cat still evaded him. It seemed Blue thought that they were playing.

“Hey, c’mon, Blue.”

This time, saying it a bit angrily, he reached out again. And again, the kitten slipped away. Over and over, he tried to catch him, but Blue deftly evaded. The more desperate Kota got, the more skillfully Blue stayed out of his reach.

“B-Bluuuuuuue!”

His throat was now dry from yelling so much and being out of breath.

In a huff, he breathed hard and deep, moving his shoulders. And then, finally...

“Daaaaaagggghhhhhh! ”

Lunging forward, Kota finally captured the kitten. Perhaps satisfied after jumping and hopping around so much, Blue settled down without a struggle.

The chase took so long that by the time Kota finally headed home, the sun had long since gone down. The road home seemed much longer today. It was at this point that Kota began to think of Blue as being just a little bit of a nuisance.



Kota suddenly remembered hearing the weather girl’s forecast from the night before. She had said, *“Tomorrow will be sunny nationwide, so you won’t need*

your umbrella.”

During class, he absent-mindedly looked out the window and saw the blue sky and various cloud shapes floating freely. The ocean of sky above him seemed to go on forever.

One of those cloud shapes looked like his favorite dish, a rice omelet. It made him feel hungry. There was no way he could continue concentrating on schoolwork now.

To make matters worse, today’s math class was incredibly boring. (Well, actually, it was no different than usual.)

Kota’s grades weren’t bad, but they weren’t so great either. He was in the middle of the pack. He enjoyed physical exertion more than sitting in front of a desk. He was a normal boy. A very normal boy.

Watching the clouds made him hungrier, so he concentrated on bringing his attention back to the chalkboard.

“Ugh, oh no!” he exclaimed in surprise.

While his mind had been somewhere else, it seemed the class had moved on. As he rushed to copy the words and diagrams on the blackboard, the teacher was erasing sections he hadn’t even arrived at yet.

Kota’s teacher would, from time to time, check if the students were properly taking notes. If he was caught not taking notes, his punishment would be to wake up early to come clean the classroom for a week.

Since he had to take care of Blue, he wanted to avoid that at all costs. He could get Mai to show him her notes, but she sat too far away from him. He could just copy them later from her, but if he was caught during class now, it was the end for him.

Just as panic was seizing him, he felt a poke from behind.

“Look here.”

It was Saiki. He gave Kota a good glance at his notebook. It had all of today’s notes already copied down.

The two of them had not spoken a word to each other since the PerFree

incident. Even if their eyes met, they would quickly look away. But in the end, Saiki couldn't get himself to hate Kota. And Kota felt the same. They both actually wanted things to go back to the way they were. They just needed something to trigger the return to normalcy. Anything would do, no matter how small.

"Thanks!" Kota said in a small voice. A bit embarrassed himself, Saiki smiled in return.

"You, what are you doing there?"

The teacher, realizing something was amiss, shouted at Kota.

"Nothing!"

Kota and Saiki answered in unison, as if they had rehearsed it. Although they had been out of sync lately, they were so much in sync now that the entire class burst into commotion. Usually, the two of them were popular and were the center of attention in class. This meant the entire class could now sense that they were back together as a duo.

In reaction, the two of them just scratched their heads coyly and laughed together.

Seeing the two of them, Mai was relieved from the bottom of her heart. She hoped that they could be friends again.

"Kota, I'm so happy for you."

Afterwards, as if to make up for all the lost time, the two boys talked on and on. Boys are simple creatures. But such simplicity can be convenient at times like this. Just the slightest opportunity can wipe away any and all differences.

They talked about anything and everything— about games, TV shows, soccer, just about every insignificant thing.

They had an exceptionally grand time talking about soccer in particular. The two of them had been members of the soccer club until the fourth grade. Partly because of Mai's situation and partly because Kota had gotten into a fight protecting a friend from an upperclassman, he and Saiki—who had jumped into

the fray as well—had both quit the club. Getting Saiki involved in that incident was yet another reason for the friction between the two.

But they both still loved soccer. In fact, they were at their most intense when it came time to play soccer during P.E.

Now, while conversing about soccer, Saiki said something that resulted in confusion for Kota.

“Oh, that’s right,” Saiki recalled. “After school today, we’re taking on the guys from Classroom 3. But we’re a guy short. You wanna play, Kota?”

While saying this, Saiki shot him a glance that implied, “Of course you’re coming, right?”

But Kota was hesitant. Ever since Blue had come along, playing after school was out of the question. However, he knew that Mai was around, and he started entertaining thoughts of leaving all the responsibility to her. At least, just for today.

Besides, he thought, taking care of Blue was turning into such a chore. He found himself becoming a little annoyed by the responsibility. He had gotten too enthusiastic about being a father, but in the end, it was starting to wear him down.

Mai, Blue, Saiki—perhaps all of them were too heavy a burden for young Kota to deal with.

Just a little bit shouldn’t hurt, Kota thought. Shirking his responsibilities just for one day shouldn’t be a big deal. And with those thoughts, he finally decided.

“All right, I’ll play.”

“For real?” Saiki asked, incredulous. He yelled happily in a loud voice, brimming with hope and a newfound confidence. “Yeah! We’ll definitely win with you on the team, Kota!”

Kota justified that everything was okay. This was time spent with his best friend, after all. His sense of responsibility as a father completely vanished in the space of that thought. He reverted to being a regular fifth grader, a young boy.



“...Like I said, I’m sorry! I really have to go... Sorry! Can you take care of Blue by yourself, Mai?”

He bowed his head in shame. But in response, Mai promptly agreed, “Sure. I understand.”

“Really, I feel so bad!” Kota exclaimed.

“It’s all right,” Mai said reassuringly. “After all, I left you yesterday to take care of him by yourself.” She smiled.

“Okay then, I’m counting on ya! I have to go now! See ya.”

As he was about to leave the classroom, Mai called out to Kota.

“...Go get ’em, daddy!”

She very much wanted to send off Kota, now reunited with his best friend, with her best smile. Hearing Mai’s cheer, Kota turned to look back at her. He basked in the warmth of her soft voice and her smile that was as bright as a sunflower.

But her words suddenly reminded him of his responsibilities as a father. And he hesitated a bit.

Saiki, however, was getting impatient. “Kota, let’s go!” he urged.

“...Well, I better go.”

She bid him goodbye and waved, “Okay. See you.”

“Yup.”

Turning his back on her, he quickly dashed out of the classroom to catch up with Saiki. But the image of Mai’s smile seared itself into his mind’s eye.

It was a smile—but it seemed so lonely.

For an instant, he felt as if his chest was being squeezed and he couldn’t breathe. But it was probably just his mind playing tricks on him because as soon as he reached the schoolyard, the feeling completely dissipated. He gave himself over completely to playing soccer with his best friend for the first time in a long while.



Blue, who was being cradled in the arms of his mother, was deliriously ecstatic over being released from his dark, cardboard box.

Now out in the light of day, he noticed something fluttering in front of him. It seemed like something he liked, something fun to chase. He struggled free of his mother's arms and went after the fluttering thing.

"Oh, Blue! Don't go over there!" Mai shouted.

Mesmerized by the thing, Blue failed to hear his mother's voice.

Without warning, as it was accustomed to doing, the weather suddenly changed. Dark clouds began to form overhead.



"Aaaghhh!"

A sudden downpour. Mercilessly, the rain pounded him as if he was taking a shower.

With their soccer match abruptly interrupted by rain, Kota and the others immediately split up and headed homeward.

"And we were winning, too!" Kota muttered. "I thought the weather girl said it wouldn't rain!"

Hurrying along, he cursed the morning weather girl's irresponsible and erroneous forecast. Running at top speed, past the back street where they had first found Blue, he finally arrived home. By then he was soaked from head to toe. Even the inside of his bag was drenched.

"Aaagh, this sucks!"

Even his notebook, which had the class notes he had copied from Saiki—the trigger to rekindling their friendship—was damaged by the rain. The writing was now illegible.

"Oh no... I can't read this..." Kota exclaimed in dismay. "I can't even open the pages.."

"Hey!" his mother shouted. "What are you doing there soaked like that?!"

Upon hearing Kota's voice, his mother had gone to meet him at the door, but now stood dumbfounded at the sight of him. He looked like he had just climbed out of a swimming pool.

"What do you mean?" Kota answered, annoyed. "It just started raining all of a sudden..."

"I know that. Hurry up and get out of those clothes. You'll catch a cold!"

With that said, his mother brought a towel from the dressing room. While brutishly wiping Kota's head, she briskly removed his wet clothes.

"That hurts," Kota protested. "You don't have to do it so hard! It hurts!"

"Look at you with your hair all sloppy like this," his mother argued. "Hold still, why don't you?"

"What's that got to do with it?!" Kota retorted. "Besides, it was Nee-chan who did this anyway!"

"Ohhh my goodness! You're always blaming others! That's such a bad habit."

She was just doing what mothers usually do, pointing out her son's faults. But Kota pouted at her efforts.

"What's with that face?!" His mother slapped Kota on the head with her palm and switched her attention to the kitchen instead. Soon after, the sound of the stove being clicked on could be heard. She was probably making some delicious hot cocoa, planning to warm him up from the inside.

"Way to go, Mom," Kota said to himself. He promptly went upstairs to change into his house clothes.

Suddenly, the telephone rang. The familiar ring reverberated through the house. The piercing sound seemed to resonate especially loudly today. It reached deep into Kota's ears.

The sound of the rain pounding the windows, the wind shaking everything outside, a pulsing rhythm, the telephone ringing—all formed a dissonant symphony. Hearing these, Kota, for some reason, felt uneasy.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, his heart beat wildly. His unease rose in synch with the pounding of the rain.

The ringing stopped and Kota assumed his mother had answered the phone. But his heart continued to pound. Kota rushed towards the living room. He did not see his mother on the telephone, but there on the table, was a steaming coffee cup. The cocoa was already prepared.

Okay, he thought. He could drink away his unease with the warm cocoa. Or so he thought.

Like the steam rising from the cup, the uneasy feeling within him grew ever larger. Outside, the rain showed no signs of letting up. Through the steam, he could see the brown liquid in the cup.

He lifted his head—a ringing tone was blaring again. This time, it was the sound of the answering machine clicking on with “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” The usually light, fun melody sounded like a requiem this time. The sound seemed to be coming closer.

“Say, Kota...?”

With the cordless phone in hand, his mother entered the living room. Kota turned towards her, expectantly.

“Hey, it’s Mai-chan’s mother,” she stated. “She’s asking if we know where Mai-chan might have gone.”

At first, he couldn’t comprehend what his mother was saying.

“She’s saying that she hasn’t come home yet,” his mother added.

“...!”

Kota jumped out of his seat without even letting his mother finish.

“H-hey, Kota! What is it?!” she asked, surprised.

But he didn’t answer. He was certain she was there. Their secret place. The one they could tell no one about.

Grabbing two umbrellas, Kota ran out into the pouring rain. He knew he had to hurry.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap!”

He ran at top speed. He ran at full power. He ran and ran, realizing why he felt

so uneasy.

He wanted to shout her name at the top of his lungs. “MAI!!!”

He paused to shut the umbrella; the way it slowed him down was annoying him. He was going to get soaked again, but he couldn't care less about that. Bounding over the steps to the shrine, he scrambled up on all fours like some kind of beast. He cleared the steps in an instant and finally reached the spot.

“Meow.”

Blue looked curiously at Kota. He was probably marveling at the raindrops, which were dripping off of his “father.”

Kota took a frantic look around, but Mai was not at the shrine. Blue was there alone, inside his cardboard box. He quietly stayed in the box, which was probably because of the rain, rather than out of obedience.

Kota felt relief wash over him. She must have gone home.

It definitely seemed like she had come by, though. There was a cute handkerchief placed on top of the box to shield Blue from the rain. It was Mai's.

“Whew,” Kota exhaled in relief. “Hey, Blue!”

He relaxed as he picked up Blue, who continued to look at him with a blank expression. Maybe he worried too much. Maybe... He had passed her on the way...?

Boy was he tired. And uh-oh, he was soaked to the bone again. His mom was *really* going to be mad this time. Oh well, he couldn't do anything about that now.

In spite of these thoughts, Kota still felt a certain uneasiness. Just to make sure Mai had returned home safely, he decided to go by her house.

He was fully prepared to face his mother's fists, but when he got home later, he never received any punishment or wrath. The truth was far more cruel and painful.

The front of Mai's house was illuminated in a ghostly red light. The rain

bounced off of the spinning, scattering light. As if they had assembled to watch the light, a sea of umbrellas sprouted like blooming flowers everywhere.

Kota could only stand there in a daze, watching as it drove away in the distance.

A white car. A red lamp.

It raced away, unmistakably an ambulance.

—It was carrying Mai inside.

It all ended too soon.

In the blink of an eye, an instant passed, and then... Mai was gone.

Makihara Mai's lifetime of 10 years and a few months felt like a mere moment in time.



He regretted everything that day and wished he could turn back time. He wished so hard, but nobody heard his pleas. The world had trampled on his feelings, ignored him.

Kota bit his lip. Everything was too late. Mai was dead.

It was her chronic disease, coupled with extreme stress and fatigue, which caused an acute inflammation of her trachea. That was the cause of death.

“Death?” Kota wondered. “What is death? Is it painful? Is it sad? Is it difficult? Is it dark? Does it hurt? Does it mean somebody is gone forever? What is it, what is it?”

Kota's comprehension failed him. He wasn't even crying.

On the day of the funeral, they displayed a picture of Mai on the altar. In the picture, Mai was smiling.

“How could she be smiling like that?” Kota asked. “Why is everyone able to cry?”

Kota couldn't smile, but he couldn't bring himself to cry either. Kota, after all,

was only a young boy. He had not yet accepted Mai's death. It was too sudden. It seemed like a lie.

Right now, he felt like he could still hear that soft voice calling out to him. He also remembered he had to return the manga he had borrowed from her. And there was that video game they said they would play together. That game wasn't even out yet.

But there were other things as well. Like the shoebox at school—her shoes were not there. Her seat in class—nobody sat there anymore. On it now was a lonely bouquet of flowers.

The familiar way home, he now walked alone. The setting sun was beating down and created a single, solitary, elongated shadow. One thing was on his mind: rewind time. For he had promised to protect her.

A long time ago, Mai used to run around with almost as much energy as Kota. But when she became ill, she found it hard to keep up with Kota and the boys. Eventually, she couldn't even pace herself with the girls. She gradually drifted away from her circle of friends.

Kota had then made a promise to protect her. He had wanted to make sure she would never be alone.

But it wasn't true. He couldn't protect her. If only he could turn back time.

When class ended that day, Mai had parted with Kota and gone to the shrine by herself. She took care of Blue and played with him for a while. As she was about to go home, it happened.

Blue slipped away from Mai. He had spotted a butterfly and chased after it. Mai followed Blue into the woods. The woods were dark, and Mai promptly lost sight of Blue. She eventually lost her sense of direction and became completely lost.

Feeling uneasy, Mai soon realized that things had turned from bad to worse. Something was wrong. She couldn't breathe. And as if to add insult to injury, it began to rain.

Rain pierced the leaves and pelted the earth; it pelted Mai. Under the rain, Mai's condition began to worsen. Her breathing became painful, her vision became blurry, and her body felt heavy.

She was alone. Who knew how much time had passed? She didn't know where to go.

"*Hheeh... hheeh...*" The sound of her pained breathing leaked out of her dry throat. She was in pain, lonely and scared. Instinctively, she called out the name of the one she loved.

"...Kota... Kota..."

Her thoughts were on the one person who would always protect her, who always thought of her. He shined a light on her, like the sun. Under his light, she could blossom like a sunflower. He was her precious someone.

But today, he'd made up with his best friend. She couldn't get in the way of that. She didn't want to be a burden to him anymore.

However, being a mother meant she had to work hard. Still thinking of Kota, she summoned her remaining strength and walked forward. Finally, she found Blue.

"...Blue..." she struggled. "Let's...go... home..."

She smiled gently. Hugging Blue with her trembling hands, she placed him back in his box.

"...The rain... it's pouring hard... *cough...* I'm sorry. *Huff, huff...* this is all I can do for you...but I'll make sure you won't get wet... I'm sorry... *cough, cough.* I have... to go... home... now..."

Saying her goodbyes to the kitten, she walked away. Alone, in the rain. She had to get home or else everyone would start to worry. Kota, her mother and father... She didn't want them to suffer the burden of worrying about her.

Her breathing became even more labored and she wobbled, but persevered. But when she finally reached her house, she had exhausted all of her energy.

"Kota..."

The light which called out that name may have been extinguished, but it

would never fade away.

She wanted to smile, always. She thought of being next to him, by his side.

“I’m sorry,” she wanted to tell him. “I’m just too weak.”

“I’m sorry, Blue. I’m sorry, Kota...”

There was one last thing she wanted to do. She wanted to tell him. Before he hurt someone. Before he hurt himself.

“Please...”

—*Ring.*



“What should I do?”

Kota wanted so much for someone to tell him what to do. He felt everything was his fault. He didn’t know why Mai had had to go; what he did know was that he’d let Mai go to the shrine by herself.

Because he had wanted to go and play soccer.

He remembered their eyes meeting when they parted for the last time. He could still hear her voice in his ear; it was soft and warm. In contrast, her eyes were sad. They never did get to say goodbye properly.

He couldn’t tell her now.

He was racked with doubts. “If only I hadn’t gone with Saiki... If only I had taken notes in class... If only I had paid attention... If only we hadn’t hidden Blue... If only we had never found him...”

Then it hit him.

“That’s it!” If Blue hadn’t been around, then Mai wouldn’t have had to die. If the kitten wasn’t around, then everything would have been fine.

It was all the kitten’s fault.

At some point during his thought process, Kota had transferred the burden of responsibility away from himself and onto Blue. This was the “bad habit” his

mother had spoken of.

The first few days after Mai was gone, Kota had tried to take care of Blue by himself. But Blue was too much for Kota to handle. He was too much of a burden for a grade schooler to handle by himself.

In the end, he blamed Blue for Mai's death. But it was not true hatred he felt. It was something different. It was the pain of not being able to protect her. He wished to hide the truth from himself.

But there was no way to make the pain go away. No matter what he did, Mai would not return. But Kota was still too young to understand that. So Kota decided to get rid of Blue.

Just like the day when Mai died, a hard rain fell. He made up his mind. Determined to be cruel, he would abandon Blue. He told himself that it was all the kitten's fault.

But then, a little girl and a black cat suddenly appeared.

It was as if they were peering into his soul. They knew his thoughts.

Deathly afraid, Kota ran away. He ran and ran. Yet, he ended up at the shrine where they had hidden and raised Blue.

Truth be told, he never wanted to come here again. It even still smelled of Mai. Smelling her gentle scent again made his chest ache, it was too painful. He didn't actually understand why he had come here either.

As if he was being led, Kota wandered into the woods. Deeper and deeper, he moved forward. He didn't know the way back, not that he had the spare energy to even think about it. Then his foot sank into the rain-softened mud.

"Agh!"

He fell hard and splashed into the mud. The box, which he was still carrying, flew from his hands. It landed with a thud, throwing the lid completely open. From inside, Blue popped his head out.

Their eyes met and Kota felt an unbearable sense of guilt pierce his chest.

“Meow.”

“H-hey,” he said to the kitten.

Blue bounded deep into the woods, as if to escape from Kota.

“B-Blue!” Kota yelled.

“What the heck?” he asked himself. “Why am I chasing after him?”

What he should be doing was to just leave things as they were, since, after all, this was what he had set out to do. But for some reason, he chased after the cat. He couldn’t understand it; his body was reacting subconsciously. He stopped dead in his tracks. The kitten was right in front of him.

“Blue...”

He approached slowly.

—*Ring.*

The darkness spit out a black form.

No. It was a cat. It was *that* black cat.

“Hey, you’re lookin’ good,” it said to Blue. “Must’a been rough, all locked up in that cramped little space?”

Blue meowed in response.

Now, a white shape emerged from the darkness—it was the girl.

“So we meet again,” she greeted him, smiling softly.

“...Uh, uh... Uh...” His teeth chattered; he couldn’t form any words. He did manage, though, to keep from falling over.

“A g-g-ghost...” was all Kota managed to say.

The black cat was speaking to him now, in a very angry tone. “Hey! Punk! Whaddaya mean, ghost? Who you calling a ghost?!”

It even deftly stood on its hind legs and approached Kota. This frightened him

even more.

“Now, Momo here,” the cat was saying, “may not look like much, but she’s a certified shinigami! What have you got to say to that, eh?!”

Still standing on his hind legs, he swished his tail out front. With his forepaws, he caught his tail. Thus, he formed a “ring.” Looking through the “ring,” one could see that the space within it was distorted and not clearly visible.

“Here, Momo,” the cat called out.

“What?” the girl asked.

The cat almost slipped and fell, not quite believing his ears.

“What do you mean ‘what?’ C’mon, the ID card bit!”

“Oh, do we have to?” she whined. “Besides, I’m sure this boy wouldn’t even understand.”

“We have to keep up appearances!” the cat explained. “Come on now!”

The girl shrugged in response to the cat’s prodding. She then reached into the ring.

“Whoaaaahhh!” the black cat whooped in exaggeration.

“It’s because you act like that, that I don’t like doing this...”

“It... It’s okay... Mmph... Bbb... Come on...”

“Oh, brother...” she exclaimed, rolling her eyes. Looking bored, she finally pulled her hand out. In it, she held a white card case. She opened it and revealed the contents to Kota.

Kota couldn’t clearly understand all the words written on the card. But there was one word there that grabbed his attention. It was the only one that he could comprehend.

“How about that, huh? She’s a shinigami!” proclaimed the cat.

Though he had been wobbly just a moment ago, the cat now proudly puffed his chest out and saluted his mistress.

“A shinigami...” said Kota. “There’s a character like that in PerFree... Huh? Is

this a rare collector's card from that game? I've never seen one of these!"

Apparently, Kota had misinterpreted the black cat's words. He thought the ID card was part of the card game.

Kota's reaction almost floored the cat, who still stood with his chest puffed out.

"Ugh... Oh, man... Ack!" he mumbled, and did a back flip in shock.

"Come on, Daniel. What are you doing?" the girl said in a disgruntled tone.

She moved closer to Kota. In her arms, she held Blue and also the groggy black cat.

"You see, I am... Well, a shinigami is someone who delivers death," she explained.

"Delivers... death?" Kota repeated.

"Yes," she answered. "In other words, I take lives."

She was now standing directly in front of him; slightly taller than Kota, she looked down at him.

"Take lives...?! Huh? What are you talking about...?"

Suddenly, he began to hover in the air. Then, just as suddenly, he was roughly thrown backwards by an invisible force.

"Waaaaaaaaaggggghhhhhh?! "

Tumbling backwards, he ended up banging his head on the root of a tree. The blow was nothing compared to his mother's fists; more importantly he wondered—was this the power of the fairy-like girl before him?

"Momo!" the cat shouted in alarm. "What are you doing?! That's not what she asked you to do... *ack!*"

He was about to say something, but the girl kicked him and shut him up. He rolled away. The girl approached Kota again.

Watching him with cold eyes, she brandished her dull-colored scythe in front of him.

“If you keep complaining,” she told him, “I’ll kill you too.”



The color drained from Kota's face. He was definitely afraid now. But she suddenly broke eye contact and looked down at Blue, whom she still held in her hands.

"This cat, he's cute."

"N-not really..." he protested.

Kota fought back his fear and tried to squeeze out a manly voice.

"Look at his eyes, they're so blue. Pretty," she continued.

"Not really... It... It's nothing special..."

She seemed to be measuring Kota's reactions.

"I see. Then that means I can kill him, right?"



She was as white as snow, and her words descended upon the earth like cold ice.

"...Eek!" Kota shrieked. He tried to back away from her, but a tree trunk blocked his way. Looking down upon Kota, the girl smiled.

"My job is to claim souls and take them with me. So, I will kill this cat... You don't care, do you?"

The sharp scythe, which had been pointed at Kota before, was now being pointed at Blue.

"Meow."

He probably had no idea what kind of danger he was in. Blue just stood there meowing in a cute voice, which was quite inappropriate given his current situation.

Their eyes met. Blue, with his beautiful eyes that had compelled Mai to name him so, looked at Kota.

"Meow..."

It was as if he was calling out to Kota.

"I have to save him!" Kota said to himself.

The feelings he had locked away resurfaced. He remembered the time he and Mai had spent together. Blue was a handful, but he was so much fun. The times he spent with the two of them were gentle times. She, with her kind heart and warm voice.

He remembered what she had said to him.

“I’m the mom and you’re the dad, Kota. And Blue is our child!”

What was he willing to do for the sake of that smile? The tip of the scythe was almost touching Blue.

“Am I going to do it? Can I do it?”

There was no room for doubt now. He had to do it.

“Waaaaaaaagggggghhhhhhhhhh!! ”

Frantically, Kota focused all his energy and leapt out. He needed to rescue Blue from this girl. When he slid into the dirt, Kota had Blue safely in his arms.

“I’m not going to let you kill him!” he shouted, mud dripping from his face. “After all... I... I’m... I’m his father!!”

Casually, almost unexpectedly, she said, “So you can do it.”

She smiled. If he hadn’t seen it, he wouldn’t have believed the coldness she had displayed just a moment ago could be replaced by a gentle smile.

“Huh? Wha?!”

He didn’t understand what was going on. Beyond being taken aback, it felt like he had slipped into another dimension. The girl slowly approached him. This time, strangely, he felt absolutely no fear. Perhaps he instinctively perceived her smile meant that he had nothing to be afraid of.

“Don’t forget the way you’re feeling now,” she said. “If you ever try to abandon Blue again, *she* won’t be happy, even after she’s gone to Heaven.”

He knew exactly who the girl was referring to. “...Mai...Why... How do you know about Mai...?”

The black cat, who had been kicked aside, was now scooped up by the girl.

In an exasperated voice, the black cat said, “Like I said, she’s a shinigami! Get

with it! Gosh, your master is a real idiot!”

He was chastising Blue, who was still being held tightly in Kota’s arms. Blue simply responded with a meow.

It was the girl’s turn to speak. “I came to claim Mai-chan’s soul, but she isn’t able to leave just yet. She still has some regrets. You understand, don’t you? She is worried about you and Blue.”

When they had first found the badly weakened Blue, Mai saw herself in the kitten.

This kitten is just like me, she’d thought. He’s weak.

She believed the kitten needed to be protected, the way Kota always protected her. She decided it was now her turn to protect another. And if she could raise this kitten to be strong, maybe she herself could become strong in the process. Those feelings spurred her to care for Blue so fiercely.

But in the end, her wishes did not come true. With her dying breath, she still very much wanted Blue to survive.

Her other final thoughts were for Kota. She knew he would surely be deeply hurt. Kota would blame himself for Mai’s death, and he would try to put the blame on Blue. By hurting another, he would hurt himself. Mai did not want Kota to harbor feelings of hatred and guilt. As time passed, if these wounds did not heal, they would only grow deeper.

“At this rate, Mai-chan will never be happy, even in death. She would worry about you forever and her soul would not go on to Heaven,” the girl said sadly.

“B-but I... What am I supposed to do...?” Kota asked. “I don’t know what to do...”

He didn’t have the confidence to raise Blue by himself. He was only able to do it because Mai was there with him. There was no way he could do it without her.

The girl hugged Kota and said, “You can do it! You were able to do it just now. You were brave. You can do it, I know you can.”

She felt warm. In her arms, he experienced a gentle feeling. Her whiteness

made it seem like she would be cold, but it was quite the opposite. She felt so warm. For a minute, Kota puzzled over this warmth, and then he understood. It was the warmth of her heart. It was the same kind of warmth he felt when he was with Mai.

“You can do it...”

Yeah... he thought.

“You can do it...”

It was the girl’s voice and, as Kota listened closely, he noticed that it overlapped with *her* voice. Closing his eyes, he could vaguely see her image.

“...Mai...”

He searched his memories, envisioning her, and then suddenly... there she was.

It was the girl in white’s doing. Through her touch, Kota was able to make contact with Mai’s soul.

“Kota... I don’t regret a thing,” Mai told him. “I’m glad I got to meet Blue. I’m glad I was with you, Kota.” Her smile was so beautiful.

“Mai...” he called out her name.

“I’m no longer here... I can’t help you anymore... but please take care of Blue.”

“Okay,” he reassured her. “A-all right...! I... I’ll do my best... so you be happy up there in Heaven.”

“Thank you, Kota,” she told him cheerfully. “Now, I have to say goodbye...”

The girl and the cat now prepared to do what they weren’t able to do on that fateful day. Next to Mai, Kota could see the girl and the black cat whirling around, as if they were dancing. They were becoming hazy, but he could still see them. She was twirling the large scythe in her hand, but he no longer felt afraid. The dance looked so beautiful. It was a gentle dance, and yet somehow it felt sad at the same time.

So she is a fairy after all, Kota thought.

He felt as if he finally understood the girl’s true identity. Standing in the

center of the dazzling dance, Mai looked brilliant.

“Okay, Kota... Bye-bye...”

“Bye-bye... Mai...”

He waved. He waved with all his might, so she could see him all the way from Heaven.

“You can do it... ‘Daddy’...”

Then a light, a brilliant light, enveloped Mai.

“—Okay. I’ll do my best.”

He smiled. He smiled though tears flowed down his face. The tears felt warm.

With their dance over, the girl and the cat approached Kota and embraced him. A single teardrop fell from the shinigami’s eye and slid down her cheek.

“You’re such a crybaby, Momo...”

The cat’s voice sounded as if it came from far away.



—The rain finally lifted.

However, an enormous lightning bolt still fell upon Kota’s head.

“Kotaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

It came from his mother.

“Owwwwwwwwwwww!” he yelped in pain.

He received a thunderous blow. Her eyes even looked as if they were about to shoot fire.

His eyes, on the other hand, were about to well up with tears. But he fought the urge to cry with all his might.

His mother’s wrath had not subsided yet. “I told you so many times that you

can't bring animals into the house!"

"Nooooo!" Kota protested. "I'm going to take good care of him this time, I swear it! I'll protect him! I promise! After all, I... I'm his father!"

And so, the boy had grown up, just a little bit.

I have to let go

So I let her hand slip away

Remorsefully, I grasp for it again

I said I would never let go

Maybe, because your hand is so warm

Maybe, because I am weak

Maybe, because of your warmth

Thank you

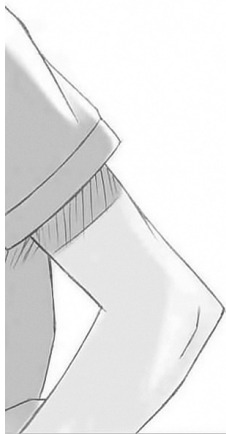
I will never let go

I can't let go.

echo — fin

III

The Flower of Wounds:
Low Blood Pressure



—Unable to see anything, I closed my eyes.
I dreamt of myself dreaming.



“How long must I wait until tomorrow?”

Waiting for tomorrow, sleepless, only resulted in an endless today. Even if he managed to glimpse the tail end of tomorrow, he could never grasp hold of it. If he reached out, he might be able to touch it momentarily; but when he grabbed hold, he would find it was merely an extension of today. Waiting sleeplessly, time dragged on.

So he would wait in his sleep until tomorrow arrived. Asleep, he suffered nightmares, choked by emptiness, regret, self-loathing, masochism and oblivion.

His memories lied to him. The lie of the truth.

And so he dreamt. He had a nightmare, a dream from which he could not wake.

Like always, the morning came, and today arrived.

He woke up in bad shape and felt even worse.

It was because of the dream. Maybe he was actually still asleep. Or, just maybe, he had been awake all this time. He dreamed of a wound that never healed, a hurt that could not be erased.

“Did I hide the scar?” he wondered. “Have I buried the scar?”

He decided to get out of bed. Opening his eyes brought an end to the dream.

And finally, today arrived.

“Now, wake up.”



“...Wake up.”

From far away, he could hear a voice.

“Wake up, now.”

The voice was definitely nearby and was getting stronger.

“Come on already. I said, wake up!”

This time, it was accompanied by shaking. His body felt like it was being shaken vigorously. He wasn't fully conscious yet. He felt awful. His head and body felt heavy. He knew the reason. He had low blood pressure, and he had dreamed that dream again.

“I said... wake up! You'll be late!”

The voice was even louder now, and his body was shaken even more violently. He knew. But his body wouldn't obey. A terrible sluggishness assailed him.

“Hey! Don't sleep! You're not supposed to go back to sleep again!”

It was impossible. He just couldn't wake up.

The voice was being a pest now. “Hey, get up, you idiot! If that's the way you want to play it, then...!”

For an instant, he felt as if his body was floating on air.

Then... thud!

“Oof...”

Croaking like a smashed frog, he crumpled to the floor. The impact woke him up a tiny bit, causing him to barely open his eyes. He could see a shadow in his hazy field of vision.

“How about that? You awake now?” the shadow asked.

“...Bro... *ngh*...” he answered.

“Don't fall back asleep on me!”

Wakefulness did not come easy.

He had very discriminating taste. But the aroma smelled good.

“Here, drink this; it’ll wake you up.”

Hayama Makoto stared at the black liquid in the cup that was handed to him. It was warm, with wisps of steam rising from it. Just looking at it made sweat ooze down his neck.

It was the season when they had already changed school uniforms, and summer was about to arrive. The climate was fast becoming humid, and he wondered why he had to drink a hot beverage like this.

He shrugged the thought off and decided to drink the coffee anyway. “Sugar and milk...” he mumbled, peering through heavy eyelids, and turning his narrow field of vision from the black coffee to the person pouring it.

“You idiot. It’s supposed to wake you up. Black is better, ain’t it?” snapped Takaki, Makoto’s older brother.

The two brothers lived in an apartment together. They split household duties between them, but Takaki did most of the cooking because that was his hobby.

Wearing an apron over his work clothes—a clean white shirt and brown pants—Takaki sat down at the table across from Makoto. Makoto sat with his head drooping, his back hunched over.

Partly because of bed head and partly because he was haphazardly growing his hair out, he looked a bit eccentric.

“...I can’t drink it black...” he protested.

“What are you, a little kid?”

He wasn’t. He was already fifteen and attending his first year of high school.

“If you get sugar in the morning,” Makoto explained, “you get your wits back quicker... That’s what Sato-sensei said...”

Who’s this Sato-sensei? Takaki thought. *Oh, I get it! Sato-sensei. Sato^[1] ... meaning sugar.*

Takaki thought it was a lame joke and stifled a laugh.

Makoto’s head was still fuzzy and so he answered his brother in a strangely straightforward manner. “It’s not a joke,” he explained. “Sato-sensei teaches

gym class and he's the coach of the girl's basketball team... He wears glasses and has a thick moustache..."

"All right, spare me the details!" Takaki exclaimed in exasperation. "Just hurry up and drink your coffee! It'll get cold!"

Takaki placed sugar and milk in front of Makoto. The younger brother poured it into his coffee absent-mindedly until he ended up with a mountain of sugar and milk. Makoto had a sweet tooth. He didn't consider black coffee a drink. Sugar always came in three overflowing spoonfuls.

He didn't exactly know if what Sato-sensei had said was true or not, but after finishing his coffee, his brain finally kicked into operational mode. This was 40 minutes after the alarm clock first went off.

Makoto was the absolute worst at waking up. So in anticipation, he would always set his alarm an hour ahead of the actual time he was supposed to get up.

He would even prepare several alarm clocks, each of them set to go off at staggered times. Despite all this effort, he still never woke up on time. So in the end, he would be roused out of bed by Takaki.

Aside from the coffee, Makoto forced himself to eat some toast, fried eggs and ham Takaki prepared. He almost never had an appetite in the morning. Perhaps it was because he was always woken up by force.

"What are you doing? You're gonna be late." Takaki prodded Makoto, who remained seated at the table even after finishing his breakfast.

"I know." Makoto reached for a paper envelope slightly larger than his palm that had been lying next to his plate. Inside was a row of pills arranged on an aluminum-backed sheet.

Pushing the contoured area with his finger, he popped out two pills. He washed them down with water. The pills were a kind of sedative. Makoto had been taking these ever since he was a child.

Lately, perhaps because of the nightmares, he was taking more of them.

Takaki used to take these pills himself, but it was only for a short period of

time. It was not for as long as Makoto had been on them.

Taking these pills was part of Makoto's normal routine; he had been relying on prescription drugs for a long time now. And Takaki felt uneasy about it.

It wasn't that Makoto was suffering from dependency or side effects, but Takaki believed it wasn't right to form a habit of taking pills.

And so time passed by, and the brothers wondered how long they had to continue hiding the scars that would not disappear. At this rate, that evasive thing called the future would never arrive.



Makoto left the apartment together with his brother, but they soon separated as Takaki headed towards the train station to go to work while Makoto proceeded on to school.

It was still early in the morning, but the sun was already blistering hot, as if to proclaim summer was near at hand. The tepid air was the kind that seemed to strangle the throat and suck the energy out of the body, replacing it with a weary, sluggish feeling.

Makoto's white shirt was sloppily unbuttoned.

Since he wasn't wearing an undershirt, his sweat stuck to his body and felt uncomfortable.

Ugh... I feel heavy... he thought.

He lifted his head of unkempt hair and hunched his back. Makoto trudged down the road with a distinctly lazy attitude. He was tall, with poor posture. He had a habit of walking with stooped shoulders, head down.

But just then, something caused him to look up.

—Ring.

He heard the sound of a bell.



The asphalt, heated by the sun, emitted fumes which warped one's view of the landscape. Standing there... was a little girl.

The girl was leaning on a wall. She stood there—a single, blooming white flower—alone under the powerful sun, amidst the swaying landscape. She wore a white dress and red shoes that would catch one's eye even from a distance. She had white hair and a snowy complexion.

One could easily mistake her for a fairy, if not for the black cat wearing an unusually large bell sitting next to her. But as conspicuous as her appearance was, nobody took notice of her. The people walked briskly by her, preoccupied with the business of the morning.

Even if they might have been in a hurry, it was strange nobody looked at her. It was as if the little girl didn't exist. But in fact, it wasn't that they didn't notice her, it was that they *couldn't* notice her.

To normal people, the girl didn't exist because she was invisible to the naked eye. But Makoto could see her.

Oh, of course, Makoto thought. I can see these kinds of things.

Makoto was able to see things other people could not. Like dead people, for instance. But even if he could see them, he would never try to approach them. He was used to apparitions, but still, they frightened him. Besides, he hated the fact he could see them. It made him feel as if he was abnormal. And whenever he experienced these phenomena, he always suffered painful headaches. So he never thought to actually involve himself with them.

He looked at the little girl; their eyes met.

Huh? he thought. *That's fummy.* Strangely, his head didn't hurt.

“Whoa! We haven't even made ourselves visible and he can see us?!”

It was the black cat who spoke in surprise. He had the voice of a young boy.

Ohhh. So he can speak, Makoto thought, somewhat taken aback. But since this was his first time communicating with so-called “spirits,” he figured maybe that was the way it was supposed to be.

The girl, however, said nothing and just watched Makoto.

Upon closer inspection, she was very beautiful. She had white skin and pink cheeks, like peaches. She appeared to be quite young. Although the outline of her body appeared roundish, her facial features were sleek and gave her an adult-like appearance. She was a heavenly vision, enough to take one's breath away.

The girl kept staring at him, and being an adolescent, Makoto felt uneasy.

"Is... Is there something on my face?" he nervously muttered, a typical line.

"Not really..."

The girl fluttered into the air like a dandelion seed and settled on the asphalt. The black cat followed closely behind.

"Don't stare at Momo like that," the black cat said in a foul manner.

Apparently, the girl was named Momo.

"Uh, well, I wasn't staring..."

He did feel a bit strange, hearing a cat speak after all. Makoto crouched down and tried to see eye to eye with the black cat.

He was almost completely black save for the white tip on his tail. He looked quite cute. His appearance stood in such stark contrast to his arrogant attitude that it almost made Makoto laugh. But he managed to keep it under control, lest he get scolded again. He tried to reach over to pet the creature.

"Don't get so touchy," the cat warned. And so, Makoto steered clear of him.

"Uh... is this your cat?" he asked the girl.

"It's not like he belongs to me..." she answered. "Daniel is my business associate."

Like her appearance, her voice was childlike, but her tone sounded strangely mature. It was all so odd.

"Why can you see us?" the cat asked. "We're supposed to be invisible."

The black cat, who was apparently named Daniel, looked at Makoto with suspicion.

"Well, that's... It seems I can see things I don't want to see. You know, like

ghosts, such as yourself.”

Makoto realized he was saying something bizarre in the midst of especially bizarre circumstances. He, who saw dead people, was here talking to a girl and cat who probably belonged in that very category,

“Hey, it’s one thing to call me a ghost...” Daniel reacted angrily, “but *Momo*?! Momo’s a shinigami!!”

Hearing the word “shinigami” jarred loose a fragment of Makoto’s memory.

“Shini...?”

“That’s right,” Daniel replied emphatically. “A shinigami.”

“Ohh, a genie...?”

“...In a bottle? Noooo! Shi-ni-gami! A god of death!”

“Yeah, well,” Makoto said incredulously. “This all smells like a lie...”

“It does not smell! Nggg... you’re such a moron! All right then, Momo!”

Irritated, Daniel thrust his tail out front and skillfully grasped the white tip with his forepaws to form a ring. Momo reached into the “ring.” As if performing some sort of space/time hocus-pocus, she pulled out an object that resembled a card case.

Without changing her expression, but in a joking tone of voice, she said, “Well, as a formality... Pleased to meet you. I’m a shinigami. But you already knew that.”

Momo thrust out a card. It appeared to be a shinigami identification card.

“Ah, thank you for being so polite,” Makoto said. “But you’re quite a peculiar one, aren’t you?” Makoto cracked a smile and scratched his face. The fact was that none of this was cause for surprise. Not because Momo and Daniel didn’t look anything like messengers of death or because he was quite used to seeing spirits and their ilk. No, he had known of the existence of these sorts of beings for some time now.

Makoto had met a shinigami once before.



The aroma wafting on the wind created hunger pangs. The smell of curry being prepared during cooking class drifted out from the ventilation fan of the home economics classroom.

It was so darned hot one wondered if anyone would actually feel like eating curry. Then again, it sure smelled good.

Makoto was seated on a bench in the school's inner courtyard, shielded from the sun by the shadows of the trees. He was drinking cafe au lait out of a carton.

It was just after third period. His breakfast had already been digested, and his stomach was now empty. He'd reached his limit for enduring hunger. Makoto was in his growth period, so this was a grave situation. Of course, the cafeteria would not be open to students until fourth period was over. The only thing he could do was buy juice at the vending machine and get by on that. But the smell of curry was making him even hungrier.

"Aaagh! I definitely wanna have curry today!" Makoto complained, slumping backwards.

His eyes met with someone's. The second time it had happened today. But this time, it was a normal human's.

"Ngah...?" Lying on his back, Makoto uttered a strange, surprised noise.

The inner courtyard faced Makoto's homeroom, first year/group 6. Although it was forbidden, it was possible to climb down to the inner courtyard from the window.

Now, from the classroom window, about two meters away, a female student peered at Makoto.

The girl smiled, perhaps at the sight of Makoto's open mouth gaping in surprise or perhaps because their eyes had met. Makoto stood up and faced the girl. She had long hair and a hint of makeup. The girl did not make a bad impression on Makoto. On the contrary, she was quite cute, though not particularly memorable.



Makoto tended to have trouble placing his classmates' names to their faces. And if he did not make an effort to remember, it was even worse.

But he remembered this girl's name.

Hiura Toiro.

It was a peculiar name, so even Makoto remembered it. For a while after enrollment, the teachers from various departments had marveled in unison at what an unusual name it was.

And each time, the girl's cheeks would redden and she would feel embarrassed. Perhaps because of her cute reaction, she became popular with the boys. Makoto's male classmates proclaimed this year to be a "boon year." In other words, the girls in this year's incoming class were a fine harvest.

On the other hand, Makoto was not interested in any one girl. He also took no notice of Toiro, even though she was supposed to be rather cute.

"Break time's almost over," Toiro said.

"Yeah."

Makoto left the bench. Without the protective shadow of the trees, the heat of the sun singed. He placed his hand on the windowsill next to Toiro. The windowsill was hot. He had no intention of holding onto it forever, so he hurried into the classroom.

"It's so hot, I don't understand how you can eat curry," Toiro said.

"Huh?" Makoto asked in return. Then the thought hit him. "Oh. You were... listening?"

Those were the words he had muttered to himself on the bench. He felt a bit embarrassed over having been overheard.

"I heard you," she said, smiling. "You said you wanted curry."

She usually spoke with a tense voice during class, but now she was bright and cheerful. And when she smiled, she was much cuter than he thought. The school's dowdy sailor uniforms didn't look so bad on her either. He was impressed, but not that interested. He still hadn't formed an opinion of her yet.



During the entire fourth period, Makoto conducted an orchestra performed by his growling stomach. He somehow kept his hunger at bay. He dashed out of the classroom as soon as class ended. He usually ate lunch with a few of his classmates, but today he wanted to eat as soon as possible, so he rushed off alone.

Running into the still-empty cafeteria, he immediately leapt towards the food ticket vending machines. Shoveling in the coins he had prepared in advance during class, he purchased a curry ticket without hesitation.

Giving the ticket to the lady at the counter, he received a plate full of curry in return.

“All right!” Giving a cheer, Makoto placed a spoon on his tray and took a seat at a table. But he had forgotten to get water.

“Crap.”

He reluctantly stood up. “Water is curry’s best friend,” he reminded himself.

But by that time, several students were already lined up at the water dispenser.

“You gotta be kidding...?!”

He had no choice but to line up. The girl in front of him was taking her sweet time, and Makoto became irritated. She was getting five cups of water. She must have been getting some for her friends too. But he couldn’t very well slug her and tell her to hurry up. So he waited quietly and was finally able to get some water for himself.

“Such a hassle,” he grumbled.

He finally returned to the curry that awaited him. He scooped up an ideal amount of rice and curry sauce and brought it to his mouth. But before he could chomp down on it, the P.A. system crackled to life.

“Attention, first year/group 6 student Hayama Makoto, please report to Handa-sensei in the faculty room immediately.”

The dull voice of the old man from the in-school P.A. system had singled him

out. Handa-sensei was the math teacher, from the class Makoto had just left. He was someone who looked older than his years, and was a dull, flabby man.

Makoto had no idea why he was being called. “Hm?” he wondered. “Did I do something wrong?”

“I can’t just ignore it...” he told himself. “But what am I supposed to do with my curry?!”

Though he found it hard to leave, Makoto grabbed one of his classmates and told him, “I’m putting you in charge of world peace and the fate of my curry!”

Leaving these orders, he hurried off to the faculty room.

Handa-sensei accused Makoto as soon as he arrived. “You weren’t paying attention in class at all, were you?”

It seemed Handa-sensei didn’t like the fact that Makoto had constantly looked down to control his hunger, and that he had not remained astute during class.

Now that he thought about it, he recalled being reprimanded in class, but his hunger made him oblivious to it. And to top it off, he might have dashed out of the classroom without making the end-of-class bow to the teacher.

Oops...

“Hayama, why are you here at this school?” Handa asked.

“The tuition is cheaper than a private school,” Makoto answered swiftly. “And I can walk here from my house. It’s convenient.”

Makoto had intended it as a serious answer. In actuality, he chose a public school over a private one in consideration of his family’s finances. But it was also true that it was the closest high school to his house.

In the countryside, public schools were better than private schools. And this was a top-ranking high school. This was why Makoto had studied hard and passed the entrance requirements.

Of course, Handa-sensei didn’t buy his answers. “Don’t mess with me!” he yelled. “You’re nothing but a freshman! I don’t buy that big attitude of yours!”

Makoto gave a vague reply. His heart wasn't in it. It was with the curry. But still, Handa's attacks continued.

"And furthermore, Hayama, just because you're popular with the girls doesn't give you the right to get a big head!" Handa-sensei screamed, adjusting his glasses, which had slipped because of the sweat pouring from his face.

I'm popular with the girls? Makoto thought. *That's news to me.*

If it was a boon year for boys, it was actually a boon year for girls too. And Makoto was counted as one of the cute guys. Makoto was tall and thin and his face wasn't bad-looking either. He was cheerful and sociable, and his seemingly aloof nature—which was actually laziness—might have made a good impression too.

Handa-sensei must have heard about Makoto's popularity from somewhere and was now referring to it.

"Listen up, now. You students..."

Handa-sensei lectured on and on. By the time he was finished, lunchtime was over. The bell sounded and Makoto was told to return to class.

He was unable to eat his curry.



As the day dragged on, Makoto got so hungry his stomach actually began to cramp.

The fifth-period English teacher had strong features. Today, because his hunger brought him to a near-delirious state, the teacher almost looked Indian to Makoto, and his lecture on grammar began to sound as if it was another language.

"Would you like some curry? Will it be chicken curry? Beef curry? Pork curry? Seafood curry? Vegetarian curry? Curry is spicy and quite delicious. We Indians never lie."

Makoto was hearing things. He also felt as if he was being assaulted by hallucinations. He saw a turban-wearing Indian with a very suspicious-looking moustache. The Indian was riding an elephant and was headed Makoto's way.

He was saying something.

“Hm? What’s that?” Makoto asked.

“What are you doing, Hayama?” the Indian asked back. “Wake up!”

“Wake up? Ha ha ha ha!” Makoto laughed. “You sound like my older brother, Mr. Indian.”

“Wake up...! Hayamaaaaaa!!”

But it wasn’t an Indian. It was his teacher, whose angry voice was ripping through the relative silence of the afternoon class.

“What happened, Makoto-kun?” Toiro asked Makoto, who was sprawled on his desk after fifth period ended. He had been magnificently scolded. Again. Not only had he interrupted class, but he was also reprimanded for being a slacker.

“Uh, nothing...” he told her. “It’s just...”

He couldn’t possibly tell her his hunger had made him hallucinate about an Indian man. But then, he didn’t have to tell her. It turned out she was a very perceptive girl.

“Maybe it was because you were hungry?”

“Er...” he stammered. “W-well... That may be true, or maybe not, or maybe yes...”

“Ha ha! You’re so funny, Makoto-kun.” She smiled a carefree smile at him. “Well,” she continued, “I heard you got paged during lunch break, so I was thinking maybe you didn’t get to eat lunch.”

Makoto could only laugh ruefully as she spoke. Thinking about hunger made his stomach growl even more.

“Well then, if you don’t mind...” she volunteered, “I do have some leftover lunch...”

“Are you serious?!” he asked, incredulous. It didn’t matter anymore if it was freshly cooked or leftovers or whether or not it was curry, anything would do as long as it could subdue his growling stomach.

“Oh, and I haven’t touched my *onigiri*.”^[2]

“Oh no, no, no!” he said emphatically. “I don’t mind at all!”

“Okay, good. Then, here.”

“Yes! You’re a lifesaver!” he gleefully exclaimed.

Gratefully receiving the *bento*^[3] box from Toiro, Makoto quickly untied the yellow handkerchief it was wrapped in. Opening the lid, which had a cute illustration on it, he saw that there was still over half left. There was even some food still left untouched.

“Aaggghh!”

He was no longer able to speak words; he could only utter animal-like sounds. Makoto pounced on the food and finished it in an instant.

“Whew...” he sighed happily. “That was very satisfying! Thank you!”

Makoto bowed his head in deep gratitude, bumping it on the desk while he was at it.

“Ha ha ha!” Toiro couldn’t help but laugh; she found it terribly funny. She was pretty cute after all. He now saw why all the boys in class were going nuts over her. He thought this over while placing the chopsticks back into their case.

Hm? Chopsticks? he thought. *Why am I holding chopsticks? Whose chopsticks? What is this...?! Oh no!*

“S-sorry!” he said out loud. “I used your chopsticks without asking!”

While it was true Makoto was dying of hunger, he still had to apologize for his lack of manners. This was one of those rare moments when he regretted his upbringing.

“Oh, that’s okay,” she reassured him. “I don’t mind. Besides...”

“Besides...?”

“If it’s you,” she continued, “then it’s okay.”

Her cheeks reddened bashfully. Holding her bundled-up *bento* box, she hurried back to her seat. Her steps pitter-pattered as she ran. Her skirt, which was a little bit longer than the other girls’, fluttered with her movements.

He knew he shouldn't look, but he just had to. He was, after all, a guy. But because he was looking up her skirt, Makoto noticed a large purple bruise on her thigh.

Maybe that's why she wears such a long skirt, he thought. To hide that.

For some reason, his memory struck a dissonant chord.

Throb, throb...throb...

—Try to remember.

The scar is still there, isn't it?



This morning, he had met a shinigami. That would make it the second time he had experienced such an encounter. The first time was when his father died.

At that time, the shinigami appeared in black, and he felt extremely fearful. Since then, he had been able to see things he did not want to see.

Today, he had met that little girl, another shinigami. The girl, Momo, was a strange one.

"I'm an outcast," she often said.

Momo wore a white outfit and red shoes. Her face was childlike, beautiful and strangely compelling. She did not seem like a shinigami at all. She was definitely different from the shinigami he had seen long ago, the shinigami who took his father.

"Have you come for me?" Makoto asked, half-jokingly.

"No," Momo answered.

"You're not on the list yet," added Daniel.

"Oh, really?" He smiled wryly.

"Why? Are you so eager to die?" Momo asked.

"No... I have no intention of dying now..." Makoto said. "No intention at all."

There were still some things he wanted to do. No, there were still some things he *must* do.

“Well, that’s a normal response.” Momo brushed away the strands of white hair that had fallen on her face.

“A lot of people are killing themselves these days,” Daniel related. “It’s a lot of work for us.”

Daniel folded his arms—or rather, forepaws— while talking. He skillfully kept his balance by using his tail. Makoto found the sight quite funny and snorted a tiny laugh.

“Pfft...” he giggled.

“You’re an odd one yourself,” Momo said to Makoto, who was still stifling a laugh.

“Am I?” he asked.

“A lot, don’t you think?” she told him. “Look around you.”

“Around me?”

Makoto did as he was told and looked around. He saw that passersby were giving him cold stares. The humid air instantly felt chilly. Shivering, he began to wish there was a heater nearby. When someone met his gaze, they would turn away and quicken their pace.

Oh, right, he thought. They can’t see what I can...

“Well, uh,” he said aloud, “Guess I’d better be going... huh?”

Momo and Daniel were already gone. Somehow, it made him feel even emptier inside. The people in the street probably thought the heat had made him crazy, talking to himself like that. In any case, he really was “odd,” just as Momo had said.

Eventually, he would meet them again, the little girl who administered death and the black cat who summoned ill tidings.



“The curry’s so good, even Indians are shocked!” proclaimed the store from which Makoto bought some curry-filled bread. It was a new item at the convenience store where he also worked part time.

Makoto was intrigued and bought it. It seemed the curry-craving he had during lunch time had a lasting effect on him. He regretted getting *Calpis*^[4] to wash down the bread, but oh well. In any case, he would now be able to eat curry, even if it was encased in fried bread.

After school, he had immediately gone to his part-time job. It was almost 10 p.m. now, so he was starving.

The convenience store where he worked was not very far from his and his brother’s apartment. Unlike the big cities, the streets in this town weren’t very crowded and the roads were wide. There weren’t many street lights; that was a bummer, but if he walked quickly, he could get home in five minutes.

But even five minutes was too long a wait, so he took the curry bread from the bag. He would eat it while walking.

“Yes!” He opened the plastic wrapping, and the aroma of deep-fried bread wafted out.

“Chomp... munch, munch... Huh?”

He didn’t taste any curry in the first bite. He felt cheated. He didn’t expect to be teased at this late stage of the game.

Oh well, he thought, one more bite and the curry will be there. Ah, yes.

But he would be denied that moment.

“...Hey, don’t... No!”

From ahead, he heard the faint screams of a girl. Wondering what the commotion was all about, he squinted into the darkness. He could make out the white sailor uniform of a girl. It was the girls’ uniform from Makoto’s high school. He tried to see more of what was going on.

“Woof!”

It was a dog, a really big Shepherd. Makoto had seen the dog before. It was a pedigreed pack dog owned by a nouveau-riche person from the neighborhood.

There were rumors about how it had injured some kids several times in the past. But the owner disproved each incident, saying, “Those kids were just pestering my baby.”

This time, the dumb dog had apparently escaped while it was being walked. It still had its leash on.

This is trouble! Makoto thought.

The dog chased after a plastic bag the high school girl held in her hand. It probably held some kind of food.

At this late hour, there was nobody else walking the street other than Makoto. In any case, he needed to distract the animal from the girl. He looked for something to throw at the dog, but the only thing he had within reach was the curry bread in his hand. It was still emitting a delicious aroma.

“Oh, man!” he said to himself. “Gotta be kidding me!”

“Growllll!” By now, the barking had become more intense and the girl was so scared she wasn’t even able to scream any longer. Makoto had to do something and he had to do it fast.

Stupid nouveau-riche dog! he thought. *You should at least get fed enough!*

Although his junior high club activity involved kendo and not baseball, he threw the bread anyway and prayed that his aim was good enough. He tossed the curry bread with all his might at the dog.

Splat!

It was not an encouraging sound. The curry bread had flown in an arc and somehow nailed the dog right in the face.

“Good, now’s the time!” Makoto told himself.

Makoto dashed out and reached for the girl, who looked just about ready to collapse, and grabbed her hand. The dog, not understanding what had happened, just shook its head. It found the curry bread on the ground and

sniffed it. Seemingly satisfied with the smell, it snatched the bread up in its mouth and devoured it with a mighty chomp. Crumbs fell sloppily from the sides of the dog's mouth onto the street. The dog seemed to find it delicious. Well, after all, even Indians were shocked by the taste.

"Darn it all, that was *my* curry bread!"

With tears of frustration in his eyes, Makoto bid the curry bread farewell. He then took off with the girl in tow. After running for a bit, he turned and looked. The dog was nowhere to be seen. It seemed they had gotten away.

"Darn that stupid dog! I should call the pound!"

He entertained thoughts of revenge for his curry bread. But then, the girl he rescued spoke up. "Thank you, Makoto-kun."

"Huh? How do you know my... Uh, Hiura?!"

Since it was dark, he hadn't realized that the girl in trouble was actually... Hiura Toiro.



"So you live around here, Hiura?"

Makoto took Toiro to a park, in an attempt to calm her down. He sat on one of the swings and tried to make casual conversation.

Toiro sat down on the swing next to him. She seemed to have calmed down considerably now. "No, I was thinking of picking up a few groceries on my way home. I just got off work and, you know, there's a supermarket nearby. It's about the only place still open at this hour."

"Oh, so you have a part-time job too?" he asked. He kicked at the ground, and the swing began to sway.

Technically, their school forbade students from working part-time jobs. Since their school had a high ratio of students who went on to higher education, it was only natural to have such a rule. But since Makoto had to consider his household's finances, he had gotten permission to work part time.

Although he had made good progress in the kendo club in junior high, because of his job he wasn't able to join club activities anymore. It was just as

well, he thought, he had been getting bored with it anyway.

However, he wasn't sure Toiro's situation was the same as his. There were many students who worked part time without the school's permission. Plus, she was a modern high school girl. There were probably plenty of things she might want to buy. He decided not to stick his nose into her affairs.

Makoto continued to sway on the swing. For a while, it made the only sound heard throughout the park on this quiet evening. It was still early summer. The air was cool at this hour. Perhaps because they perspired from running, it almost felt chilly.

He envied Toiro for her long-sleeved summer uniform. Her skirt was short, but perhaps because she didn't want to get a suntan, she wore a long-sleeved top, as many girls did.

So, thought Makoto, she's one of those girls.

As if to tease the shivering Makoto, a breeze blew past the two. Toiro's long hair wafted in the wind.

Ah... he thought, looking in awe at her. He gazed at the white nape of her neck and her flowing hair.

He suddenly felt like he was watching something erotic and began to feel naughty.

Then he noticed a "scar" on the nape of her neck. It was a small, red scar, right on the surface of her white skin. Thinking it was a hickey, he felt embarrassed and tried to avert his eyes. He was a bit disappointed.

Well, of course, she's pretty, he said to himself. *It wouldn't be hard to imagine she has a boyfriend, or even two.*

His thoughts surprised him. Was he expecting something? Perhaps he'd gotten his signals crossed when he had thought that she'd spoken to him suggestively earlier at school.

Just then, Toiro became aware of Makoto's gaze.

"Oh..." she exclaimed. She seemed extremely troubled and hid the scar with her hand. "I got some hot oil splashed on me at work," she explained. "It still

kinda bums.”

She smiled shyly at him. Makoto felt she was trying too hard, and he had an uneasy feeling.

What’s this all about? he wondered. *It seems strange, like something’s slightly off...*

“I’m okay now,” Toiro said, disturbing Makoto’s train of thought, “so I guess I better get going.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay.” Makoto stopped swinging. “Then, could I walk you home?” he asked her.

He wasn’t exactly sure what was going on, but he felt anxious about her.

“Oh, no, it’s okay,” she told him hurriedly. “I’m fine now. Thank you, Makoto-kun.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll do something for you in return next time,” she promised.

“That’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

She shook her head and said, “I want to thank you properly.”

“All right.” He was quite happy with just feelings of gratitude, but perhaps she wouldn’t be satisfied with only those.

“Okay then, see you tomorrow,” she said, bidding him farewell.

“See ya.”

He waved and watched her leave. The weight of the contents of the plastic bag rocked her arm back and forth. In the bag were potatoes, onions and some curry paste that would shock even an Indian.

What the hell...? he thought, surprised. *So it was curry too.*

That reminded him... he was still hungry!



His heart was fragile and easily broken.

Reflected in the eyes of the boy were a cold, dull-colored light and the

warmth of someone's cheeks.

Red, the color of blood.

Black, the shadow that would take away what was precious to him.

"Don't go!" he pleaded. "It's all my fault! Don't go! Don't take him away!"

The black shadow. Red blood. A cold voice, a trembling voice.

"Don't go. It's my fault."

Eventually, he would be roused from his sleep. It was morning again. He would awaken as usual.

And it was terrible.

"Makoto, wake up. You're gonna be late."

It was his older brother's voice. Today had arrived again.

But he could not escape his nightmares.



"Here, consider this a token of my gratitude for what happened yesterday."

"Wow, are you serious?!" Makoto asked Toiru.

Lunch break had just started. She was embarrassed, so they looked for a place that wasn't too crowded. Because she was uncomfortable, he felt more stressed than he should have.

Toiro had prepared a *bento* as thanks for his valiant efforts yesterday. They finally picked a spot beneath a cherry tree on the edge of the schoolyard and opened the *bento* boxes.

"Whoaaa, wow!"

For Makoto, who was a school lunch kind of guy, this was the most touching

kind of gesture. The portions were pretty healthy too, to boot.

“I can’t vouch for the taste, though.” Toiro bashfully waited for Makoto’s reaction.

“This tastes great!” Makoto roared immediately upon chomping down on a mini hamburger.

His older brother Takaki’s self-professed hobby was cooking, so the food he made was generally better than most stuff Makoto would get when he ate out. Toiro’s cooking was equally good. The reasons Makoto ate school food were quantity and price rather than taste.

“I just made this with stuff that was in the fridge,” she told him.

“Cafeteria food is no match for this,” he said, thoroughly satisfied.

Makoto quickly devoured the contents of the *bento* and eagerly moved on to sipping the tea Toiro had brought in a thermos. It was a nice barley tea, well chilled and without the smell of chlorine.

“Hey, do you make *bento* every day? Because I saw you had one yesterday,” he asked.

“Yes. I also made one for my father, so... it’s economical.”

“Whoa, you’re pretty driven for somebody so young.”

He meant it as a joke, since they were the same age. But her expressions and mannerisms, not to mention her slender appearance, made her seem like a proper young lady. Quite unexpectedly, he somehow felt an affinity towards her.

“I live with my older brother, y’see. We do all our own chores, so I know a little bit about how hard it is for you, Hiura.”

Toiro looked at him with interest. “Do you live away from your parents, Makoto-kun?”

“Well, sort of,” he answered.

“What’s it like not living with your parents?” Toiro leaned forward, showing an earnest interest. But he couldn’t tell if she was interested in him or if she

was interested in the fact someone her age was living away from his parents. Whatever the case, she seemed awfully serious.

Makoto hesitated as he mulled things over. After a brief pause, he said, “It’s a little... lonely... I guess...”

Those were his true feelings.

“Well, I have my brother, at least,” he added.

“At least?”

She realized something in Makoto had changed. He was speaking in a softer, lower tone of voice.

“Well, I was in an orphanage,” he revealed.

“Whaaat?”

“When I was in grade school, my mom and dad died. So, after me and my brother got passed around by our relatives, we were put in an orphanage. It’s not too far from here. It was called ‘Nanoha-en.’ We lived there for a long time with dozens of other kids just like us. So now it’s just the two of us, it’s kinda lonely, I guess.”

He smiled. She, on the other hand, was terribly surprised. Well, it was only natural for her to feel that way.

Normally, Makoto never showed this side of himself. He didn’t want anybody to feel sorry for him, and he hated being pitied. He was always composed—cheerful, happy, as if he had no troubles in the world. He did not want others to share his sadness. He didn’t want to be understood. They wouldn’t understand anyway. Only a person who suffered the same injuries could understand his pain. So Makoto smiled and hid his wounds.

“Come to think of it,” he mumbled to himself, “I haven’t shown my face at Nanoha-en in ages. I wonder how those guys are doing now.”

Inwardly, he was thinking, *Oh brother, I did it again. I shouldn’t have mentioned it... Especially to a girl I might like.*

But the girl continued to look straight at Makoto. Usually, in these types of situations, the automatic response would be, “Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t have asked

that.” Then they would look at you with pity in their eyes. He didn’t want an apology or sympathy.

But she was different.

Instead of apologizing, Toiro talked about herself. “At my house... my mother left us. She left with another guy. It was right before I started junior high. That day... my junior high school uniform was ready, so I went to pick it up. I was so happy I even wore my new uniform home. I wanted to show it off to my mother, so I hurried home. But... she wasn’t there. My mother was nowhere to be found... She left.”

“...Hiura...”

This turn of events was a first for him. Makoto was confused. In all honesty, he didn’t know what to say to her. He might have been used to sympathy, but he wasn’t used to doling it out himself. He had always been on the receiving end, not the giving end.

No, he didn’t need to give her his sympathy, he realized. After all, she was in a sort of similar situation as he was.

“Thank you,” Toiro replied. Extending her hand slowly, she touched Makoto’s chest with her index finger. She pointed to his heart and said, “Thank you for showing me your wounds.”

She did her best to smile. Her eyes were welling up with tears, but she tried her best. She was smiling for him. Her smile somehow pierced his wound and it felt painful. But maybe he could open up his heart to this girl. So it seemed.

He was happy.



Hiura Toiro was a nice girl. It was fun to be with her, and he felt safe. He finally had someone he could show his wounds to. When he was with Toiro, he also did not see any supernatural visions, though he knew they were still there and wouldn’t exactly disappear.

Even though the days passed by peacefully, Makoto’s nightmares still grew

worse. He couldn't find the reason for them. The nightmares compelled him to increase the dosage of his medication. Takaki was worried, but Makoto smiled and said everything was fine.

But on that day, he felt absolutely terrible. He felt dizzy and nauseated when he stood up. Takaki told him to skip school and rest, but since final exams were coming up, he couldn't take a day off.

Besides, Handa-sensei reprimanded him for being too happy-go-lucky and laid back. If his quarter grades ended up bad, Handa-sensei would be proven right. For Makoto, that was something he could not allow.

Suppressing the nausea he felt from the increased dosage of sedatives, he forced the pills into his mouth. He swallowed them with a big gulp of water. At this rate, he was about to run out of pills before his scheduled hospital visit.

Holding his throbbing head, Makoto got ready to leave. "Whew... maybe I'll stop by the hospital after school..."

"Makoto, I think you should stay home today," Takaki called out in a worried voice.

"I'm fine... I'm fine. This is nothing."

Makoto forced a smile in an attempt to allay his brother's fears. But the attempt was futile. Seeing how pale Makoto's face was only served to make Takaki worry even more.

"I'll be going now," Makoto said. "You'll be late for work if you fool around too much, bro."

"Yeah..."

Takaki watched his little brother from behind as he waved goodbye, walking out with his typical stooped posture. Ever since he was wounded, early on, Makoto had learned to act a certain way so others wouldn't worry about him.

Jeez, why do you always try so hard...? Takaki thought. *Just like back then...*

Takaki carried wounds also.

Makoto didn't clearly remember how he got to the classroom, but here he was, safely seated in front of his desk. He began to feel a bit better.

See, bro? he thought. *I told you I was fine, didn't I?*

Toiro noticed Makoto staring out into space, with his face propped in his hands, so she went over to him.

"What's the matter, Makoto-kun?"

"Oh, nothing," he answered. "I wasn't feeling too well until just a little while ago. But I feel better now."

"Oh—well, that's good," she smiled in relief.

He felt comfortable, watching her smile. He thought this was the best medicine. He then noticed the book Toiro was carrying with her. It was a thick book, with a sturdy hard cover.

"What is that?" he asked. "A manga?"

"No. Do you only read manga, Makoto-kun?"

"Basically," he answered.

"Manga are okay, but why don't you read a book without so many pictures every once in a while?"

"Like that one?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"What book is it?" asked Makoto.

Makoto never read anything other than manga, but this book somehow aroused his curiosity. The cover had a pretty illustration on it. It showed a brilliant blue sky with light that looked like it was really shining. In the middle stood a lone person.

"This is a collection of poems and essays," Toiro explained.

"Hmm... Poems, eh?"

Toiro handed the book to him for closer inspection. He had lost interest in the contents, but did want to take a closer look at the cover. The book was entitled

Poems for Boys. The more he looked at the cover, the more splendid the picture became.

“Who is this, uh...this...I kuma... Daiki...? Is that how you pronounce his name? Hm...” asked Makoto.

More attracted to the illustration than to the poems inside, Makoto began flipping through the pages, in the hopes of finding more pretty pictures.

One particular page caught his eye. The words seemed to pop off the page, communicating directly to his brain. The words were not handwritten, yet he felt something peculiar about them.

His heart jumped.

In the ancient memories I saw

The decayed color of steel.

I waited only for morning to come.

The scenery seemed just as it always was.

I waited only for time to pass.

In truth, I wanted to pass by this world.

To go somewhere not of this world.

Somewhere not like this world, somewhere

Only to... sleep.

“.....”

Makoto was shocked. This poem was talking to him. He felt that the words expressed some kind of greater existence. He sensed a sort of power or energy existing in each word, between the words, and between the lines.

Seeing Makoto so immersed in the book, Toiro explained, “The theme of this book is death. Like about people who want to commit suicide or people who actually kill themselves. It was written by their friends and relatives...”

“What...?”

Startled, Makoto lifted his head. He now understood the identity of this

“power.” It was life itself. The life that emanated from the cover illustration. The blue sky, which carried the light. He somehow knew that the drawing also evoked a desire for death, a painful longing for death. But the drawing was something which could exist in both planes.

“I wonder what they were thinking,” she said. “The people who wrote this...”

He felt the sincerity in her words. And more so, there was also... admiration.

“I wonder what people who commit suicide... in the instant they die, what do they think about...?” she wondered.

“Who knows?”

“I wonder what it’s like to die...?” she continued.

“Who knows?”

Answering her musings, Makoto suddenly remembered the dizziness he had felt that morning. Toiro’s expression changed. Written on her face was a look of envy.

In a suppressed voice, Makoto broke the silence. “I... I have no idea how people who died felt. And I especially wouldn’t know how a person who killed himself would feel...”

He felt something like anger welling up within him, along with a sense of nausea. “When you die, it’s over, isn’t it?” he stated. “Everything is over. You can’t say what you want to say... You can’t communicate what you want to communicate... That’s why the people who’re left behind write these painful poems, don’t you think?!”

“Makoto-kun...”

“Choosing how my life will be, it isn’t only up to me... It doesn’t belong to me. My life exists for somebody else’s sake, and I can’t do anything about it. Ever!”

Makoto ran out of the classroom. He couldn’t suppress his nausea anymore. His homeroom teacher was walking down the hall, but Makoto ignored him and dashed into the bathroom.

“Gwaaaghhh... cough cough cough!”

He had left the apartment without eating anything, so the only thing he vomited was stomach acid. The acidic taste and sharp smell made him feel even worse. He wished he could just vomit everything out. Everything.

Even that memory—



He fell with a thud. The woman, drenched in red blood, looked at the lifeless corpse. A knife was clutched tightly in her trembling hand.

“Mommy...”

Hearing the tiny wisp of a voice calling out to her, the woman turned around. Behind her stood a little boy. He had bruises all over his body, as if he had been badly beaten. On his cheek was a fresh wound.

Still with the knife in hand, the woman reached out to the boy and held him tightly.

“It’s okay now...” she told him. “It’s okay now...”

The woman repeated those words over and over, as if it were a chant. The crimson on her clothes seeped onto the boy’s. The woman’s hands, steeped in red, caressed his cheeks. Blood trickled from the wound on the boy’s cheek.

The crimson from both of them flowed and mixed together. They blended and became one.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said. “It’s because I’m a bad boy.”

“What are you saying! It’s not your fault, none of it is!”

The woman sounded hysterical. Her voice shattered the silence. It echoed and rang in his ears. It hurt. As the boy was held painfully tight against the woman’s shoulder, his eyes began to well up with tears. The pools of water spread out and became larger.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts! the thoughts rang in his head. *I’m sorry. It’s because I’m a bad boy.*

He opened his mouth to speak, but the words would not come out. Strange.

Maybe it was all just a dream? After all, the black shadow before him was taking Daddy away. It was taking him up into the sky.

“Please, don’t take him away,” he tried to plead. “It’s all my fault. It’s because I’m a bad boy. I was only being scolded. He was just scolding me because I was bad. Don’t take him away.”

“—It’s my fault.”



“.....”

Makoto woke up and was immediately assaulted by a terrible headache. Next to him, he heard a girl’s voice.

“Are you all right...?” Toiro gazed at him intently, worried.

He had been asleep.

After vomiting, Makoto did not return to the classroom. Instead, he had gone to the nurse’s office. He had decided to lie down and sleep. His terrible headache was making him ill. Because of the pain, he did not notice his eyes were wet.

Makoto gingerly raised himself up. “What... time is it now...?”

“It’s lunch break already,” Toiro explained. “I came by the nurse’s office a few times already, but you were asleep...”

Toiro had heard from the homeroom teacher that Makoto was in the nurse’s office and came by to check during each break period.

“I see... Where’s the nurse...?” he asked.

“She said she was going to the faculty room, so she asked me to watch over you.”

“Oh?”

“Yep...”

The two of them fell silent. As if time had stopped, the white-walled room became a vacuum. Then he heard it.

—*Ring.*

A bell was ringing in the distance.

He couldn't understand it, but he felt compelled to tell Toiro everything. He had to show it, his crimson scar. He felt he could tell her.

"The reason my father died... it was my fault..."

"...?"

Toiro swallowed hard, not saying a word. The thing he never talked about, couldn't talk about, the memory he couldn't let go of. Makoto was preparing himself to talk about it.

Perhaps the large dosage of prescription drugs and the relentless nightmares had weakened his heart. Whatever the reason, he only knew he wanted her, Toiro, to be the person to whom he told everything.

"My mom and dad had my big brother when they were still teenagers. They went against everyone's wishes and eloped. My dad was a serious guy. When he got a job, all he knew to do was his job... And then I was born. It was then, I've been told, that he started to change..."

Soon after Makoto was born, the company his father worked for began to experience a downturn. His father worked desperately hard, but the company never regained its financial footing. It was a small company, and his father bore a heavy burden. In that frantic environment, his father's mental health suffered. He began to physically abuse the very young Makoto.

On the other hand, his mother was indifferent towards Makoto. She focused all her care on Takaki. Compared with Takaki, who was a superior student and his mother's pride, Makoto was the troublesome one.

Makoto needed help, yet he feared his father and his mother would not offer any. In fact, she estranged herself even more from Makoto.

Despite the misery, Makoto never hated his father. He came to believe his father was angry with him because he could do nothing right, because he was a

bad child. So he tried to become a good boy.

He worked desperately hard. But still, his father's beatings would not stop. The senseless violence continued. Makoto's father would punch him, kick him and pound him with the bat, which was bought with the intention of playing father-and-son baseball.

There was, however, one person who did reach out to Makoto.

...It was Takaki.

But in defending Makoto, Takaki also bore the brunt of his father's violence. Seeing his brother hurt, Makoto, from then on, did not reach out to anyone for help anymore. He did not cry out, silently enduring the beatings. He would only stare at his father through reddened, tear-swollen eyes. He wished only to be loved. By his father. And his mother.

"But... I... shouldn't have wished for that..."

He couldn't find the words. His voice trembled. In his memory, he was still that young child. The memories of the past were alive now.

"My mom... My mother stabbed him... My father..."

It happened in front of the young Makoto's eyes.

His father's violence grew worse. He grabbed a knife and pointed it towards Makoto. He swung it, and it cut into Makoto's body, creating a crimson scar on his cheek, and blood flowed.

It was only then that his mother protected Makoto. Struggling with his father, she grabbed the knife and ended up stabbing him deep in the abdomen. It was not an accident. His mother murdered his father in order to save her son.

As a mother, it was impossible for her not to love Makoto. He was her child, after all. But she was also afraid. Her husband might even beat her and Takaki next. When she saw Makoto's life was in danger, she shook off her fear and developed the will to kill.

With her hands drenched red by her husband's blood, she hugged Makoto tightly to her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's okay now."

His mother actually cared deeply for Makoto. For the first time, he felt his mother's warmth. He was happy and sad at the same time.

Then it happened.

His father, lying in a pool of his own blood, was surrounded by a rising black shadow. The shadow held an enormous scythe and took his father's soul from his body... up, into the sky. Makoto begged the shadow not to take away his father, but the shadow only shook its head.

Since then, Makoto began to see things that should not be seen, things he did not wish to see. As a result, he suffered from terrible headaches.

"...My father died... and my mother was taken away by the police... My brother and I were taken in by relatives, but nobody wanted to take responsibility for abandoned children. Especially not the sons of a murderer... so we were placed in an orphanage..."

After some time, his mother died. It was in her prison cell, when the prison guards weren't looking, that she hanged herself.

Makoto thought everything was a bad dream. So every night, he would go to sleep waiting for morning to come. But when morning arrived, it was today again. The dream was actually reality. A reality which would never go away. A reality which caused Makoto great suffering.

Makoto began to believe he was seeing things that could not be seen because he was a bad child. Takaki, certainly, could not see these things.

But Takaki and the adults at the orphanage thought it was due to trauma and it couldn't be helped. They told Makoto he was a normal child, and gently gave him their support and care.

Eventually, receiving doctor's treatments and by relying on prescription drugs, Makoto began to recover. Through the loss of his parents, he ironically became the recipient of much love and affection.

Still, he hid his wounds. He acted cheerful and smiled as if nothing was ever wrong. Every morning, he would struggle to turn his back on the dreams from which he could not awaken. Dragging his body awake, hiding his wounds, he would smile.

“There were times when I would forget how to smile...but still, I smiled... I think I hid my wounds. I think I tried really hard... But I don’t know... when I’m with you, Hiura... I can’t hide them anymore... The truth is that it’s hard for me, I feel sad, lonely, and I want to cry...”

Still lying atop the bed, Makoto pulled at the white sheets and tucked in his knees. Holding his trembling body together, he buried his tear-stained face into his knees. Toiro reached out for him.

“You don’t have to hide anymore...” she told him. “Your wounds will heal... so don’t hide your precious scars. I’m here now...”

Gently, she hugged him. This was the warmth he longed for. It was very much like the warmth of his mother back then.

“It’ll be all right... I...”

Whatever Toiro was planning to say, she never got to say it, as the nurse had returned to the room.

“What’s wrong?” the nurse asked. “Are you feeling ill?”

The nurse noticed that Makoto was all huddled up under the blanket.

“I think he’s not feeling very well,” Toiro said evasively.

She continued to rub Makoto’s back gently. He wanted to feel her warmth, even for just a bit longer.

But he failed to notice something important.



Makoto decided to leave school early. Though he felt much better, he still had a headache. It felt strange to him, to be walking home at an hour when Toiro and the others were still copying teachers’ writings from the blackboard.

“Come to think of it...” he said to himself, “I was going to go to the doctor... I’ve still got some time before my afternoon appointment... Maybe I’ll go by the park...”

The hospital was near the orphanage where he and his brother had stayed for

some time. Thinking he would relax for a while before his afternoon checkup started, he headed towards the station and made a turn up the street.

—*Ring.*

Immediately after turning the corner, he was surprised to see an empty lot, overgrown with weeds. There, a little girl stood. She wore red shoes and a white dress. It was Momo.

She looked like an angel who had just descended upon the field. Only this angel held, in her tiny hand, an enormous scythe. That was the only thing that indicated she was a shinigami. It was virtually the same as the one held by the shadow, long ago.

Enduring the throbbing headache, Makoto approached Momo.

“Well, aren’t we hard at work taking lives?”

Makoto meant it as a joke, but the remark was in bad taste. A fierceness appeared in Momo’s angelic face as she cast her huge eyes upon Makoto.

“Ow!” Makoto suddenly yelped. “Ngggghhh-hhhh!!” Makoto hadn’t noticed where Daniel was, and now the cat was biting him.

“You stupid human!” Daniel yelled. “It’s not like Momo does this because it’s fun! She’s searching for something! And you humans... you know what she thinks about you humans... Waaaaah!”

The last part of the sentence remained unintelligible as Daniel erupted into a crying fit. From out of the cat’s eyes flowed large, ping-pong ball sized tears.

Momo cradled Daniel in her arms. “Daniel, it’s okay.”

“But this jerk,” the cat sobbed. “He... he doesn’t understand anything... Waaghh...!”

“It’s okay. C’mon, don’t cry,” Momo whispered. She caressed Daniel gently in an effort to comfort him.

“...I’m sorry...” Makoto apologized.

Judging by Daniel's reaction, Makoto understood he had said something terribly cruel.

He glared at Makoto coldly, with his tail and fur standing on end. "Well, I don't forgive you!" Daniel retorted.

"Daniel, I said it's okay," Momo affirmed.

"I'm really sorry," Makoto apologized again, bowing his head.

"I'm sure he'll find it in his heart to forgive you," Momo said in a very adult manner, though her voice sounded so childlike.

"I'm sorry..." Makoto said yet again.

Raising his head, he saw Momo patting and comforting Daniel, who was still sobbing ping-pong ball tears. It was a sight far different from Makoto's initial impression of them. He had thought they were cold and detached. Instead, Momo wore such a warm and gentle expression.

Makoto thought she was "peculiar" and he was right. The shinigami who came when his father had died was cold and fearsome. But from the start, Momo never came across that way. To the contrary, one almost got the sense that she was intentionally trying to give off the impression that she was unfeeling.

"What he just said, about you searching for something..." Makoto asked casually.

"Well, don't *you* have something, something that you're searching for?" Momo asked in return. "Everyone has something that they're searching for, right?"

"Well... Uh..." he stammered.

"You haven't found it yet?" she asked.

"Huh...?"

"You can see things that can't be seen, right? So why can't you see *it*? That precious thing, it's really close to you. Why can't you see it? You should be able to."

“Uh, what are you talking about...?” he said, confused.

“You don’t understand, do you? Why are you able to see things that cannot be seen? What’s the reason you can see these things... Haven’t you ever thought about that?”

“...I don’t know...” he answered.

“I see... Then you’ll never be able to find it. It’s so close to you, this precious thing. Yet if you can’t find it, you’ll lose it forever.”

Having said that, the girl—taking her black cat with her—vanished, leaving a trace of white light behind.



A bald-headed little boy saw Makoto approaching and raced towards him.

“Heyyy! Makoto! What’s up with you, you look so mean!”

“Whaddaya mean I look mean?” Makoto exclaimed. “How can you say that when we haven’t seen each other in forever, Nobu?”

Makoto had arrived at Nanoha-en and was immediately surrounded by several kids. For one reason or another, all the children here had been separated from their parents.

Nobu was now something of a punk chieftain among the kids. But when Makoto was still living in the orphanage, Nobu had always been secluded, immersed in the sadness of having to live away from his parents.

“Say, Makoto, don’t look so sad. Let’s play,” said Nobu.

Did he look that bad? Makoto wondered to himself. In truth, his headaches hadn’t subsided yet. And now his head was reeling more than ever, what with all the things the shinigami girl, Momo, had said to him.

“Oh sorry, Nobu. I have a headache today. I wanted to relax a little here before I go to the hospital.”

“Oh, you’re so boring,” Nobu whined. “Well, fine. Oh, hey! Let’s have dinner together, Makoto. Today they’re serving your favorite, the orphanage director’s special curry!”

“Are you serious?!”

In spite of himself, Makoto began to feel happy.

He received counseling at the hospital. He was able to talk about things he could not speak of before, such as his feelings for the girl. He felt as if he could now begin to move forward.

The curry was waiting for him. His headache eased up a bit. So Makoto gave Takaki a call, telling him he was going to eat at the orphanage tonight.

He now realized a lot of time had passed since he had the curry craving, but still, he hadn't been able to eat any curry yet. He felt grateful, very grateful, to the orphanage director who decided to prepare curry despite the hot weather. Makoto struggled to stop himself from drooling.



It was evening and she hurried home. Today, her father would be coming home early from work. She had to hurry back and prepare dinner. But when she got to the house, the lights were not on yet.

Huh? He's not here yet? she thought, puzzled.

Placing her hand on the doorknob, she noticed the door was unlocked.

“...?”

She felt suspicious and opened the door slowly. Cautiously, she peered inside.

Thump.

A strange sound came from the living room.

“...Daddy...” she whispered. “Are you home?”

Despite having a bad feeling and all her senses screaming out in silent alarm, she went into the house. Fearfully, she arrived in the living room. There she saw a silhouette.

“D-Daddy...?”

The curtains were drawn. The light of the setting sun seeped through, tinting the room red. Then she saw him. He was sitting listlessly on the floor.

“Daddy...?”

The person did not respond, but there seemed to be no doubt that it was her father. Seeing what was in his hand, she shuddered.

“Daddy!”

Stifling a scream, she ran to her father. The terrible smell of alcohol filled the room.

“Daddy! You promised me you wouldn’t drink anymore!”

She shook her father’s shoulders, but got no response. She scanned the room and made another alarming discovery. In addition to what was in his hand, several bottles and cans of alcohol were scattered about the room.

Oh no.

It appeared he had drunk more than he ever had before. There was no telling what he might do now.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

Finally, in response to his daughter’s desperate cries, the father came to.

“Where were you...?” he asked in a shaky voice, his eyes unfocused.

“Daddy?”

“I was lonely, you went out... Where the hell did you go?”

“What are you talking about, Daddy...?!”

“Don’t leave me ever again. Stay with me... forever... forever...”

Oh no, she thought in alarm.

She sensed it instinctively. Her father was so intoxicated he couldn’t tell her apart from her mother.

“Daddy! It’s me! It’s Toiro!”

“Don’t leave me again.”

His mind was not there. His eyes were unfocused and his words were slurred. She thought to call the emergency center and turned to reach for the telephone.

“Waaaaaaggggghhhhhhhh!”

Without warning, her father let out a bloodcurdling scream. She felt pain bolt through her neck. Helplessly, she collapsed on the floor. Struggling against the pain, she looked up and saw her father standing over her. Having lost his senses, he held an empty liquor bottle and was poised to hit her with it again.

“Help!” she wanted to scream. “Help! Help me, Makoto-kun!!”



—*Ring.*

“Makoto! Don’t you think that’s too much?”

While the table was being set, Nobu suspiciously took note of the plates Makoto brought over.

“It’s fine. I’m a growing boy!” said Makoto, making a face and sticking his tongue out at Nobu.

He deliberately shoved a heaping plate piled high with rice and curry right under Nobu’s nose.

“Well, I’m a growing boy too!” Nobu retorted.

“Hmm? What grade are you in now?” Makoto asked.

“Fifth grade!”

“Yeah, how tall are you?”

“142 centimeters! Or thereabouts!”

Makoto teased Nobu and rubbed his chestnut-shaped head. “Whaddaya mean ‘thereabouts’? You’ve still got a ways to go. I’m in high school, and I stand at 180 cm.”

“Nghhhh!” Nobu reacted angrily. “You blockhead!”

Though he barked like an insulted puppy, Nobu sat back down next to Makoto. Several children also sat down at the table. Finally, the orphanage director took her seat.

Saying that today would be more fun than usual since Makoto-kun was back, she led the pre-meal prayer. Nanoha-en was a Catholic institution. The slightly rotund, gentle old lady whom Makoto and the other kids knew as the orphanage director, was also a full-fledged nun. But since she always wore sweatshirts and acted like a regular old lady, gradually she went from being called “Sister” to “Director.”

While Makoto prayed for the first time in a long while with the director and

the kids, he felt someone poking him in the side.

“Hey, hey, Makoto...”

It was Nobu.

“What? Say your prayers,” Makoto told him.

“I will. But hey...”

Nobu seemed to have no intention of praying. Reluctantly, Makoto decided to deal with the boy.

“What is it?”

“Do you still see things?” Nobu asked.

“Things? Like what?”

“You know, you used to say you could see ghosts and stuff.”

“Ah, maybe I did say that.”

“So, can you still see them?” Nobu asked again.

Nobu’s eyes were filled with curiosity. But when he first came here, his eyes had been dimly clouded. Now, they sparkled. Just as Makoto’s eyes did after he had found a place where his wounds could heal.

“Found...?”

—*Ring.*

He heard the sound of a bell.

Throb.

“Hey, what’s the matter, Makoto?” Nobu asked.

“Uh, nothing, I just... Ow!”

“A-are you all right, Makoto?!”

“Y-yeah...”

Throb!

He was having another headache. And a terribly strong one. It felt like his head was about to crack in two. Each time his head throbbed, something flashed in his mind.

“Gwahhh!”

What was he seeing?

Throb!

“What is it?!” Nobu asked innocently. “Hey, is it that thing I just said? Are you seeing something?!”

“Aggh! Shut up, you idiot!” he wanted to say.

This was the first time he had experienced anything like this. Each time he saw these visions, he experienced a headache. But those visions were all things he could see with his own eyes.

This time...

Throb!

The vision was something he saw with his mind’s eye and burned itself into his brain.

“What was that just now?!” he asked himself. “A house? A house somewhere. It’s painted orange. Is it the color of a sunset?”

The visions began to fit into a pattern and became clearer.

“It’s a fire!” he realized. “It’s burning! A fire!”

He didn’t know why he was seeing these things.

Throb!

“Gaaaaghh!” he screamed. “It hurts!”

Now, everyone in the room became aware of Makoto’s condition.

“It’s Makoto’s E.S.P.!” Nobu announced.

All of the children looked at him with curiosity. He wanted to scream at Nobu. The boy was getting on his nerves.

He wanted to say, “I’m gonna give you a noogie later, just you wait,” but the pain engulfed him.

“What is this?!” he asked himself. “Ngghh! There’s somebody in the fire?!”

Throb... throb... throb, throb.

“Hey... Oh my God... You can’t be serious...”

The vision flashed in his brain. And now, he could see everything clearly.

“...Hiura...” he murmured.

In the burning fire, he could see Toiro lying there, unconscious.

“What is this?” he asked again. “What’s going on?! Why am I seeing this?! Am I hallucinating? I’m hallucinating, right?! What’s happening? What’s going on?! What do you want me to do?! Why am I seeing this?!”

—*Ring.*

“Huh...?”

So that’s what it means, I can see things that cannot be seen. It’s that precious

thing the girl was talking about. The thing that's most precious to me.

"Protect it... Or lose it..."

Makoto suddenly understood this power, which he had previously believed useless. The reason for his having it was finally making itself clear now.

"Yeah, it has to be!" he realized. "Then, i-it was... It was this very day that I..."

"Director!" he said out loud. "I have to go! Please keep my curry warm until I get back!"

Makoto dashed out of the orphanage.

Nobu watched Makoto leave, his eyes filled with awe. "Makoto's kinda cool... He's like a superhero."



"I don't even know where Hiura lives!"

He suddenly realized he was lacking one vital piece of information as he barreled out of the orphanage.

I need to see it! he thought, panicking. The vision he had seen so clearly just a moment ago had suddenly left him. Cursing under his breath, Makoto butted his head against the concrete wall encircling Nanoha-en.

"Ggyaah!" he yelped in anger.

His head made a terribly dull and unimpressive sound. Of course, he had no chance of winning against a concrete wall, and blood began to pour down his forehead. But the pain brought the visions back. Her house was not too far from the park they had visited some time ago. Several time-lapse photo-esque visions showed him the way to her house from the park.

"Damn, I'm good!"

The blood trickled from his forehead to his lips. He licked the warm blood and noted it tasted of iron.

A strong wind began to blow. In his vision, he saw the same wind that fanned the fire as the house was consumed in flames. In other words, what he saw was the future. It also meant it might be a future he could prevent from happening. He should still be able to make it in time. Makoto jumped into a cab, figuring it would be faster than taking the train.

“Old man,” he told the driver, “I need you to go one trillion times faster than you’ve ever driven before! Please!”

He threw his wallet at the driver. It contained his entire fortune. It seemed like a reckless request, but he was that desperate.

The driver, wearing Tetsuya Watari-style ^[5] sunglasses and sporting a crew cut, asked curiously. “Hey, young fella, you got some sort of situation here?”

“Just hurry up and go!” Makoto yelled impatiently.

“All right! Done.”

As luck would have it, the driver did turn out to be a speed freak, expertly zooming his yellow cab in and out of traffic with unbelievable speed and technique.

But while the taxi zoomed through the streets of Japan, Makoto still couldn’t help but fret. He might really lose that which was precious to him.

Now that he realized just how much she meant to him, and there was a possibility he could lose her, he was nearly freaking out. He wondered why those who were precious to him always seemed to have this tendency to vanish. His family, his father, his mother. Was he going to lose her now too?

“Not this time!” he told himself vehemently. “My father and my mother, they died... because of me. But I lived. I’m alive. I breathe, I have warmth and I’m here.”

He thought about why he avoided thinking about these things until now. There are things that can be discovered not by dying, but only through living.

“If this power I have was given to me for this day alone, if this is what my father and mother exchanged their lives for, and I was born only for this day... then maybe I can be forgiven for being born. This is my reason for living, the

answer I have searched for. I've found it. I've finally found it. Now I can't lose her!"

The taxi skidded into place with the force of a bullet.

"Old man, call the police and ambulances and everyone!" Makoto yelled as he dashed out of the taxi.

The sign on the door read "Hiura," confirming this indeed was the place. Makoto reached for the doorknob and saw the door was unlocked.

"Hiuraaaaaa!" he called out, leaping into the house.

The living room was in a terrible state.

"Hiura!"

Soaked from head to toe, Toiro was lying there listlessly.

"Hey, get a hold of yourself!"

He was about to slap Toiro's cheeks, but he stopped, seeing a bruise on her face. It looked like it came from a punch. Makoto knew those kinds of bruises well. In his past he had suffered the same kinds of bruises all over his body.

"Crap! How did this happen?" He held her tight and felt her breathing.

"Good," he said to himself. "She's still alive."

But his relief was short lived. Sniffing, he realized the liquid covering her, and spread all over the living room, was gasoline.

"Ggaaaahhhhhh! "

He heard a voice yelling from behind him. Turning around, he saw a man standing there. The setting sun, which could be seen from the window, shone from behind the man. His face was not clearly visible.

"You!" Makoto yelled. "How dare you?!"

Makoto braced himself to charge at the man, but he stopped short, noticing that the man held a lighter in his hand.

"H-hey!" he yelled at him. "Put that down!"

“Aaaaagghhhhh!” the man screamed out.

“God, are you out of your mind?!”

“Aaaaaiiaaaaaahhhhh! ”

The man flipped open the lighter top.

“Stop!” Makoto yelled, tackling the man.

“Gaaaahhhhhh!”

“Don’t mess with a former kendo club member!”

In the struggle, Makoto’s fist somehow found the man’s face. Wincing in pain, the man gave up. Makoto snatched the lighter away from him.

“Huff, huff, huff...” How do ya like that, huh?” Makoto bragged.

He turned his attention back to Toiro, still shooting careful glances at the man.

“Hiura! Hiura!”

“...Hm...” she responded to his voice.

“Hiura! It’s me, Makoto! Get a hold of yourself! You’re hurt pretty bad! Er, I mean, you’re not hurt that bad! But it’s—”

“...M...Makoto... kun... why...” she stammered as she came to. Her eyes began to focus.

“Makoto-kun...?” she asked.

“Are you all right, Hiura?!”

“How... Makoto-kun... What are you doing here...?”

“I don’t really know either,” he explained, “but I felt you were in danger. Anyway, don’t worry. I beat him down with my iron fists.”

“Iron fists...?”

Her memory was still fuzzy and Makoto—in his excitement—couldn’t explain the situation properly.

“Uh...yeah.”

“...Gwaaaahhh...”

“Wha—! Not again...” Makoto exclaimed in surprise.

The man had stood up and staggered towards them.

“Bastard,” Makoto said. “Looks like I’m gonna have to give him another taste of my—”

“Daddy!” Toiro shouted, interrupting Makoto.

“Huh... This guy... Oh my God... Your dad...?!” Like pieces in a puzzle, the little things he noticed about Toiro suddenly fell into place.

The bruise on her thigh, the long skirts and long-sleeved blouses she preferred even in hot weather, the welt on her neck, the way she smiled to laugh it all off... It was all to hide the marks made by her father’s abuse.

He knew if she were to take her clothes off now, the painful scars would be revealed. So why hadn’t he realized it? Why couldn’t he realize it? The signs were all there before, only he hadn’t noticed.

There must have been some kind of sign, a cry for help, he thought. Why didn’t I realize it?

“Daddy! Please!” Toiro pleaded.

“Aaaaghhhh!”

But her father no longer understood her words. His mind was damaged. Something in his hand suddenly glinted.

Makoto and Toiro stared dumbfounded. He was holding a knife. It was pointed in their direction.

“Aaaggh,” he hissed, “Let’s... Let’s be together... together...”

“Daddy!” Toiro screamed.

Still confusing Toiro for her mother, her father was out to kill her.

He was going to kill her and then kill himself. In so doing, he would be able to achieve eternity. An eternity, a world for themselves. Makoto understood his intentions perfectly. Still, he couldn’t get himself to act. The scene he was witnessing forced his painful memories to resurface.

Red blood, his mother's voice, her warmth, her cold death.

His memories robbed him of all mobility.

What is this? he asked himself. *Am I still the same child I was back then? Can't I ever wake up from this nightmare? Will I always have to hide my scars?*

Looking at Toiro, he willed himself into action. He knew if he was killed, everything would end here. He had to do it. Yes, he still bore the scars and they still hurt, but he had to do something.

"I'm alive. And... I'm going to live!"

Cursing loudly, Makoto leapt into action. He moved swift as lightning and hurled himself onto Toiro's father's chest.

As soon as Makoto hit him, Toiro's father swung the knife down.

—*Ring.*



"I thought... I died."

Sitting inside a speeding vehicle, Makoto felt relief washing over him. The taxi driver had called an ambulance and now he and Toiro were inside it.

The knife Toiro's father swung slashed Makoto's left arm, but it was not a fatal wound. In retaliation, Makoto's fist met his face. This time, he knocked him unconscious. The police arrived and arrested the man on the spot.

Still, Makoto felt confused. He was not sure if this was the way things should be. He understood perfectly how Toiro might feel, seeing her parent taken away by the police. Just as his mother had been.

He gazed at Toiro, who was lying down on the stretcher. The bruise she had received from the punch was apparently not very serious. She was fully conscious now. He gripped her right hand firmly in his.

"Why did you come, Makoto-kun?" Toiro asked.

"Uh, well, how do I say this... I saw you."

“Saw me?” she asked.

“I told you before I could see things that couldn’t be seen, right? Hm? Oh, I didn’t tell you? Well, I saw you were in trouble, in a vision. That’s how I was able to save you.”

Makoto fell deep into thought. Meeting with the shinigami girl and being able to rescue Toiro, he figured that this power, which he had never wanted, was actually not such a bad thing. All of it led to this.

“I’m sorry, Makoto-kun, for getting you involved,” Toiro spoke up, breaking the sudden silence.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Makoto said, almost angrily.

Tears suddenly flowed from her eyes.

“S-sorry. I may have said that a little too harshly,” he apologized.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just... Makoto-kun, you showed me your ‘scars’... So I’m going to show you mine...”

The tears were flowing freely now.

“Hiura...”

“This was my mother’s second marriage. I was born from my mother’s first marriage, while my little brother was from my father’s first marriage. But still, we were a family. Until my mother went away...”

After her mother left, her father became an alcoholic. He never used to drink before. But he wanted to escape reality.

He also began to abuse Toiro. He would drink and then beat her up. But when he sobered up, he became the gentle father again. He was usually a kind father, one who wouldn’t hurt a fly. He was her step-father, but Toiro respected him as a true parent and loved him.

It must have been hard for him to look at Toiro, who—as she entered her teen years—began to resemble her mother. In all the times he beat her, he never once hit her in the face until today. Her face, which was just like her mother’s.

She could never disobey her father, even when he drank and transformed into a bully. He would dry up, cry and apologize. But then he would drink again.

“But, it’s okay this way... Now my father has a chance to get back on his feet. I couldn’t do it alone... Thank you... Makoto-kun...”

She tried to smile through the tears. Makoto smiled back and drew closer to her.

Makoto needed Toiro. Toiro needed Makoto.

His own scars might never disappear. But by showing each other their scars, by comforting each other, this time they might be able to heal each other’s hearts.

Smiling was the best medicine.



The moon shone brightly. An ambulance, with its sirens blaring and lamps flashing, flew by. A girl floated beneath the light of the moon and looked down upon the scene.

The black cat, spreading its wings like a bat, hovered around the girl. “Why did you save them?”

“I didn’t really do anything.” The girl brushed back her white hair and smiled faintly.

“That girl, even if she wasn’t really going to die, was supposed to spend the rest of her life as a vegetable,” the cat explained.

“Really?” the girl asked, feigning surprise.

“You’re playing dumb. And here you are, getting involved with these humans again. You’re gonna get scolded by the director and it won’t be my problem, got it? Jeez, you’re such a meddler! Now you’ve changed his future too. He was supposed to remain trapped in emotional darkness.”

“His fate may have changed,” she explained, “but it doesn’t change the fact they chose life.”

“What are you talking about? That’s elementary. They’re human, after all,

right?”

The girl said nothing and smiled. Then slowly, she began dancing.

“Momo, why are you dancing? You don’t have to deliver anyone’s soul.”

“Hm, why indeed?” she said enigmatically.

“What are you talking about? Fine, then I’ll dance too!”

The girl and the black cat danced in a circle. Her white hair, white outfit and red shoes twinkled in the starlight. But it wasn’t the sad dance that they usually danced. The black cat somehow began to enjoy this *other* dance.

“Momo, you’re not crying today.” The black cat teased her and laughed.

The girl pouted slightly. “Of course I’m not crying. Stop making it sound like I’m such a crybaby. Besides, it’s going to be a lot tougher for them from here on out. It’s more painful and dangerous to live than it is to die. But life must be lived. He can do that which I can never do.”

“Momo...” The black cat stopped dancing.

“Don’t look at me that way, Daniel.”

“But, Momo aren’t you lonely, all by yourself?”

“No, not at all,” she answered.

“But...”

“I have you, Daniel.”

The girl smiled beautifully.



He no longer expected rewards, such as wanting to be loved by someone. As long as he had people who were precious to him, and as long as the two of them could be together.

But as usual, he had a hard time waking up. He no longer experienced nightmares, though in return, he saw something else.

Another... morning.

The injury to his arm had healed well. Meanwhile, Toiro and her brother had

made arrangements to live with her grandmother. It was a bit far away, but she would continue to attend high school with Makoto.

The scar on her cheek disappeared.

“Hey, it’s almost summer vacation...” he said.

It seemed the days passed by tremendously fast. She stood next to him with a gentle smile, like a flower blooming in a harsh land.

“Hey, how about I cook you a feast next time?” she suggested.

“Seriously? You’re going to cook for me?”

“Well, yeah,” she answered. “I’m pretty good.” She smiled proudly and asked, “So what do you want to eat?”

“Hmm... let’s see... Oh! *That’s* what I want to eat!”

That’s it. It can’t be anything else.

“Curry rice! With chicken, please!”

low blood pressure — fin.





IV

Watch the Sky:
Ballad for Innocence/ Momo

*A piece of sky, cut like a square,
do you still carry it with you?*



“Hey, Momo. We’ve already delivered our quota of souls to Heaven, so why are we going back down to Earth?”

Daniel, spreading his bat-like wings, was not pleased.

The scenery sprawled below them was a mass of anonymous-looking gray apartment complexes. An infinite number of large buildings seemed to be competing with each other to reach the sky first, as if to say, “We are closer to Heaven than you are.”

While this was a place overflowing with souls, the city was not a place where a soul could rest.

Momo and Daniel stopped just above the buildings.

“Y’know, you come down to Earth far too much... even when you have no business here, Momo...”

Hearing Daniel’s complaints, Momo replied, “Like I’ve said, you don’t have to come with me every time.”

“You say that each and every time, so you already know the answer. In the first place, I’m a servant demon, so I can’t just slack off and leave my mistress. As a member of the great house of servant demons renowned throughout the Afterlife, the ‘House of Alara,’ you know I can’t just do that.”

Daniel took pride in his bloodline and puffed his chest out when he spoke about it.

“Indeed,” she replied. “Then you should have no complaints, O Illustrious Servant Demon,” teased Momo. After all, if he was such a great servant demon from a renowned household like he claimed, he should have no problem serving his mistress.

Of course, Momo didn’t really think about their relationship in those terms. Daniel knew that. So he would, at times, speak harshly towards her and offer his opinions (even when unwanted.) While they were mistress/servant, they acted more like partners.

However, hearing his splendid bloodline brushed off with a casual “Indeed”

hurt Daniel's feelings. It depressed him and deflated his ego. Daniel was proud of his renowned heritage.

"...Well, yeah, but... you don't have to say it like that, y'know. I... I'm doing my best. It's hard for me, Momo, because you're always bending the rules... You understand that, don't you? Or maybe you don't. You're Momo, after all..."

Daniel rolled himself up like a soccer ball and spun around. He felt as if he was being pushed aside. Transformed into a ball, he trembled and began losing altitude.

"H-hey, Daniel?!"

Ignoring Momo's calls, Daniel continued to descend.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "It's my fault. Hey, are you listening? Daniel... Daniel? Danny? Dan-chan?"

Danny and Dan-chan were her pet names for him. But he didn't particularly appreciate being referred to like that. He considered himself a full-fledged servant demon, so to be called in such a manner felt like he was being treated like a child and he hated that.

Usually when he was teased by Momo, he would fume and throw tantrums, but today, he didn't respond. He simply spun round and round and continued to descend.

"Daniel, how far are you planning to go down?"

Momo increased her speed and caught up with him. At this point, they were at mid-level of the tallest building in the area.

"Daniel."

Oh boy, thought Momo as she hugged the black-winged ball of fur.

"Hey, how long are you going to pout like that?" she asked.

He reluctantly responded, "...But, but, but..."

He was mumbling and still scrunched up like a ball.

"But what?"

"...But I'm trying so hard. I'm trying really hard. I'm trying really, really hard.

And it's still not good enough for you."

"...Sigh. Of course it's good enough," Momo said gently.

"Really?"

Daniel raised his head a bit and cast an upwards glance at her, trying to read her expression.

"Really. I depend on you," she said.

"Really? You depend on me?"

"Yes."

Momo nodded and Daniel's expression brightened like the clear summer sky.

"All right!" he shouted.

To be praised by his master was an honor to a servant demon, and to be told he was depended upon was cause to jump for joy. Daniel escaped from Momo's arms, flapped his wings furiously and zipped happily around. Seeing Daniel like this, Momo smiled.

"...Really. And the fact that you serve me so loyally. I mean, I'm just a low-level shinigami... A mere 'Reaper' at that..." she said softly, so the over-elated Daniel could not hear her.

If he had heard, his expression might have changed abruptly, and he no doubt would have gotten angry again.

"Reaper" was a derogatory term among shinigami.^[2] Coming from a renowned household, Daniel despised this sort of slang. Furthermore, he considered it even worse if his mistress was called that by others.

His emotions at a high, Daniel zipped this way and that, flew, spun and then... plummeted.

"Fgyaaaaaahhhhhhh!!"

He lost control and slammed into the ground.

"Hey, hey, Daniel?!" Momo hurried to the spot where Daniel had fallen.

"Danny?"

Daniel's eyes were spinning and he was unconscious. She hugged him, a small consolation in the midst of misfortune. The shock of the fall made him woozy, but it didn't seem to be too bad. Momo breathed a sigh of relief.

Having just said she depended on him, if she were to lose him now, she herself would be lost.

"I swear..." Momo murmured. She sighed and held Daniel tightly in her arms.

She sensed a presence. Momo concentrated her energies towards the direction of the presence. In a flash, she realized what it was.

"...A person?"

Momo stood underneath an overpass that snaked between the mass of buildings. She saw a single, old, European-style building. The place seemed to be deliberately separated from the surrounding area by a towering wall. And it was strangely bright.

Surrounded on all sides by buildings, and regardless of being located underneath an overpass, sunlight conveniently streamed between the buildings and the overpass. The light was also reflected, as if by magic mirrors, by the windows of the buildings and concentrated on this one spot. It was a strange place.

Adding to the sense of otherworldliness was the fact that the European-style architecture made the building look somewhat out of place.

What's that over there... Oh my... What's somebody doing here all alone in a place like this, Momo mused.

There was a very young, small girl.



The girl was alone. She looked up into the sky.

The house was not large, but it was sufficient for the girl. The girl was inside her room. Kneeling on the bed by the window, she looked at the sky. Or rather, it was a square piece of sky—a tiny, tiny portion of the sky visible between the buildings and the overpass.

At first glance, the girl's age seemed to be around five or six years old. Her long hair was neatly arranged in braids. Her clothes were old-fashioned, giving her the look of a Western doll. Her appearance gave this place the sense that it was one that time had forgotten, cut off from the outside world.

The girl was alone, looking at the sky for a long time and never tiring of it. For some reason, the girl reminded Momo of someone, but she didn't know who. Somehow, vaguely, she seemed familiar.

Somewhat intrigued, she wanted to ask Daniel to access the human database in Heaven.

"Daniel, that girl... Uh... Come to think of it..."

Daniel was used to taking on the tasks of data control, research and management, but he was still out cold.

"Um, I'm not so good at handling these kinds of complicated tasks..." mumbled Momo to herself. But she closed her eyes and began to access the mainframe.

"—Access. ID code A-100100. Pass under—9. Disable key lock."

And... she thought, what am I supposed to do next? ...Oh, right.

"—System D. Point...here."

"Okay," she said, pleased with herself, "and now... uh, the data on that girl... is... um... Here... Huh? ...What is this...?"

She found the information she was looking for, and it troubled her.



Daniel felt a peculiar and painful sensation. His cheeks were being pulled furiously, and he came to immediately.

Startled, he looked around. Momo was by his side, sitting on the bed. But while she was giggling, she wasn't the one doing the pulling. It was a little doll-like girl.

He gave Momo a confused look, as if to say, "What the heck is going on here?"

“He seems to be awake now, so can you let him go?” Momo said to the little girl.

“Whoa, it’s real. It really moves!” the girl exclaimed.

She did as she was told and let him go. Her voice sparkled with curiosity and her big eyes glistened as she stared at Daniel.

“W-w-what? What’s going on here?!” said Daniel, utterly confused by the present situation. He scrambled to get away from the girl and scampered onto Momo’s lap.

“Waaaaaaghhhhhhhh!” the little girl yelled loudly in reaction to Daniel’s actions. “It talks!”

She said it in a sing-song voice and seemed genuinely happy and pleased. But Daniel trembled even more fearfully.

“What? What, what, what is going on here, Momo?!” Daniel asked, half frozen in fear.

“Ah ha ha!” Momo laughed in spite of herself.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘ah ha ha’?! She can see me... and touch me too! So explain!” Against his will, Daniel’s voice sounded shaky and very small.

“I’m sorry. Her name is—”

“It’s Towa!” The little girl spoke up before Momo could even finish.

The girl, Towa, sat on the bed next to Momo and looked into Daniel’s eyes.

“Hello, Danny. I’m Towa.” Towa smiled, showing her white teeth.



“This is Mimi. And this is Hanahana. And this is Pikkari. And this is Whale!”

Mimi was a stuffed bunny doll, Hanahana was a plastic elephant from a model kit, Pikkari was a plastic toy robot with silver plastic lining, and Whale was a stuffed whale doll. For some reason, he was the only one who wasn't given a special name.

Towa introduced all of the dolls and toys in her room to Daniel. It took some time, and Towa was out of breath by the time she finished introducing them all. She had that many friends. It was not a small number.

She's a little inconsistent, thought Momo.

Momo understood the fondness for stuffed animals. Towa, after all, was a little girl. But things like the robot or the realistic-looking plastic animal model seemed a bit at odds. These were the types of toys usually marketed towards boys or an older age range.

“My daddy gave me all of these!” Towa said, her cheeks flushed red.

“So anyway, what? Why am I here? Momo...” Daniel asked.

Finishing her introductions, Towa began to describe the characteristics of each toy without even pausing to breathe.

“Why are you being so friendly to this human?” Daniel asked, totally ignoring Towa. “And why is she introducing her dolls to us? Plus she's already calling me Danny...”

Daniel sulked and narrowed his eyes. He still made no attempt to leave Momo's lap.

“They're not dolls,” Towa explained. “They're my friends.”

“Oh, I see...” Daniel answered. “Argh! That's not what I'm talking about!”

“What does it matter?” Momo asked him. “Besides, you're the one who wandered in here in the first place, Daniel.”

“Huh?” he uttered.

Daniel tried to recall what happened, but his memories were murky. He

wasn't sure what actually happened.

"B-but that doesn't mean we have to get involved with humans," Daniel stuttered.

"Why?" Momo asked.

"What do you mean, why...?" he snapped, beginning to feel exasperated with his mistress again. "There're no ifs, ands or buts about it! This girl has nothing to do with any souls we're in charge of, right?"

"Right. So?"

"S-so?!" Daniel blurted out. "In the first place, we're not even allowed to come into contact with humans who are related to the souls we collect! But here we are now, getting involved with a human who has nothing to do with anything!"

"Well, once in a while it should be okay, right?" Momo asked.

"No, it's *not* okaaaaay!"

He was dumbfounded. Momo was acting as if rules were made to be broken. At this rate, Daniel would likely lose both his health and his mental well-being. Coming dangerously close to breaking the rules gave him nervous fits. And when she did break the rules, it gave him a veritable heart attack. He knew that they would get yelled at by their superiors.

Still, Daniel understood Momo had her reasons for coming into contact with humans more than necessary. She needed it.

And this time was likely no exception.



To the little girl, Daniel was the first "friend" she had who could actually move. And Momo was the first "human" she had ever met. Or so Towa thought.

In reality, Daniel was not her friend nor was Momo a human. But Towa was too young to understand these things. Towa had never stepped outside these walls, much less the house, or even her room.

"Daddy says I can't go outside," Towa said. "There's lots of scary things

outside. And he says I'm 'special.' If I go outside, I'll get killed by bad people. You're the first person I've ever met aside from Daddy, Momo."

Towa smiled innocently.

The person she called "Daddy" apparently held a very central presence in her life. She seemed to trust him completely. Just by listening to Towa's words, Momo felt as if she totally understood.

Towa most likely did not understand the weight of words "special" or "killed." Momo, however, perfectly understood the meaning of these words. She smiled, returning the little girl's smile. But she wondered if her own smile came across as forced.

Daniel, on the other hand, felt only confused. No matter how many times they did this, it never got easy. And Momo looked so sad. Her smile was too innocent. And that made it even more painful.

"Isn't this cute, Momo? It was a present from Daddy."

Towa spoke in a very familiar manner, happy to see Momo had come back to visit.

Since their first encounter, Momo had actually come by several times to visit Towa. Not that she did anything in particular. She would just watch Towa play, either by herself or with Daniel.

Sometimes they would talk. But usually, it was Towa who did all the talking. However, it didn't seem that Towa wanted to ask Momo anything in particular. Any information she was curious about, like what happened in the outside world, she received from her father.

The same went for her possessions, which she proudly showed Momo.

"You're taking the trouble during work hours to come here... What are you up to?" Daniel murmured.

"Who knows..." Momo shrugged it off.

"...You say that, but... I'll bet..."

Daniel was all set to switch into complaining mode, but then...

—*Clak.*

The sound of a lock being released was heard from outside the room. Momo and Daniel had never heard that sound before in all the time they spent here. But now, they could actually hear the door to Towa's room being opened from the outside.

Towa's expression suddenly brightened more than ever.

"Daddy!" she squealed. She ran in delight towards the slowly opening door.

"Welcome home, Daddy!"

Towa raced towards the man and hugged him.

"You must have worked really hard today,"

Towa remarked shyly as she grabbed at the man's pants legs.

The man whom Towa called "Daddy" was actually a clean-cut young man who looked like he was in his mid-20s. The man smiled at Towa and picked her up in his arms.

"I'm home, Towa," he greeted her.

He wore a suit and silver-rimmed glasses. His hair was neatly combed, and he had the air of someone very responsible for his young age.

"Oh yeah! Daddy, Momo and Danny are here... Huh?"

Towa wanted to introduce her new friends to her father, but they were nowhere to be found.

Towa glanced around the room with a puzzled look on her face. "Um, Momo and Danny... They were here, but now they're not."

"I see," the man said. "Maybe they went home already?" He spoke to her gently, playing along with what he thought was a game. He bent down and looked into Towa's eyes.

“More importantly, Towa, you didn’t go outside your room, did you?”

“No,” she answered. “I do as you tell me, Daddy. I’ve been a good girl.”

“I see. Good girl.” The man caressed Towa’s cheeks and the little girl giggled pleasantly.

“Towa,” the man continued, “you can’t survive outside this room. Lately, I’ve been seeing suspicious-looking people dressed in black around here. They’re very bad people. If they find you, they’ll probably kill you. But don’t worry, Daddy will protect you.”

He talked like he was describing a TV drama. Only he was deadly serious.

“I understand!” Towa looked straight into the man’s eyes and nodded vigorously.

“Towa... you’re very special...”

“Daddy!” she squealed, leaping into the man’s arms.

“Ah, my Towa...”

The man held her tiny body firmly and lovingly. He gave her a hug overflowing with love.



“What do you plan to do now, Momo?” Daniel asked.

He and Momo were floating in the sky, only a short distance from Towa’s residence.

“What do you mean, ‘what do I plan to do?’” Momo said, feigning ignorance.

“C’mon, I know what you’re thinking. You want to tell her the truth, don’t you?” Daniel asked.

“Well... Daniel, don’t you think this is strange?” she said, her mood darkening.

“What’s... strange...?”

Momo believed she could exorcise the things that bothered her through sheer force of will, no matter how painful they may be. What Momo did not know, however, was herself.

A shinigami, in order to atone for the crimes he or she had committed in a past life, was assigned the sad task of delivering souls. The “crime” was the taking of one’s own life. Their black appearance was a sign of that crime, and also, of their duty to deliver death and take away souls.

A shinigami possessed only the memory and guilt of their suicide and one single—most precious—memory from their past life.

But Momo was different. She had absolutely no memory of her past life. Furthermore, she was all white and wore red shoes. Because she was so unusual, she suffered ridicule from the other shinigami and was called “Reaper” by them.

Plus, there was the fact that she liked to go against the rules. As in the case of Towa, Momo went out of her way to make contact with humans. Normally, that was an unforgivable breach.

She also shed tears for the sake of humans. Most shinigami conducted the deliverance of souls in a business-like manner. They figured this was the fastest way to atone for their sins and finally be reborn and be rid of their past crimes.

Still, there were some who sympathized with Momo. Those shinigami were also called “Reapers” by the others.

Needless to say, Momo was a peculiar presence. She herself could not understand why. So at times, she cried and at other times, she smiled. But to make herself strong, she was determined to be tough-minded.

The reason Momo could not leave Towa alone was because she had a single-minded notion.

“I have to tell her what’s going on...” Momo said.

“I see,” Daniel sighed. “But...”

“But?” Momo looked at Daniel with large eyes.

“Hmm...” Daniel hesitated. “Well, how do I say this... maybe she shouldn’t know? In this case... in her case, I think that’s what may be best.”

Momo said nothing and pouted.

The little girl was young. She trusted her father and loved him. And so, to Towa, this room was her entire world. The room—where she was surrounded by stuffed animals and toys, where the locked windows only afforded her a narrow view of the sky, where her gentle father visited—was her world. It was everything to her.

“But don’t you think there’s something wrong about this...?” Momo asked.

The words that poured forth from her lips came straight from her heart. Daniel picked up on that.

“I understand that,” he said, assuring her. “I do, but... if she’s going to lose her whole world, then maybe it’s best not tell her?”

“...But...”

As Momo swallowed what she was about to say, Daniel continued, “I know that you’re trying to find yourself too, Momo... but once discovered, you don’t know what it will mean.”

“...”

“In the end, you’re just as confused as she is. You want to tell her, but you can’t. You’re going back to see her again and again. You’re too nice, Momo.”

“That’s not true...”

“It is!” Daniel vehemently said. “Like with her and all the other humans you’ve met up till now, their souls, everything, you take so personally. When a human dies, you think it’s your fault. You end up damaging yourself. I’m always worried you’ll end up blaming yourself for all the sadness in the world.”

Daniel ran out of breath. He truly cared for Momo from the bottom of his heart. He didn’t care if she was weird. He loved Momo.

Yet their feelings for each other often came out with irony or sarcasm.



That day, the little girl looked up into the sky as she always did.

“I have to go on a business trip today... I have to go somewhere far away for work, but don't worry. I'll be late, but I will come home today. I won't leave you alone for long, Towa.”

Having explained things, the man hurriedly left the daughter of his heart in the room and locked the door from outside. The windows were locked from the outside as well, so it would be impossible for young Towa to open them. The man was about to exit the grounds through the tiny space in the walls surrounding the house. He checked the area carefully first.

Where are they? he thought. Are they here? I'm not handing her over. I love her. I can't hand Towa over to them.

He began to sweat underneath his suit. Every day, he lived in fear of something. He was psychologically pressured. The only thing that calmed him was his loving Towa.

The man disappeared among the sea of people in the city.



The view of the sky from the window was, as usual, small and square. But it was very pretty. It was so blue, it felt like one could just fall into it. Then the blue sky turned red and then black, and much time passed. But still, her father did not return. And the sky turned blue again.

“Hey, Mimi, Daddy hasn't come home yet... I'm hungry... No, you can't, Mimi. Daddy said we shouldn't go outside, right...?”

The little girl, who looked like a European-style doll, talked listlessly to her stuffed rabbit doll. But the doll did not talk back.

“Why don't you say something, Mimi? Momo's Danny can speak. He's friends with Momo and can talk. Hey, Mimi, Mimi... Mimi...”

She was about to cry from hunger and loneliness, but still, she kept talking to her dolls.

“...Mimi... Mimi... Where's Daddy... Where's Daddy...?”

This time, the response which came was not silence, but a very loud noise.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

It was the sound of something furiously slamming against the lock.

“...?! D-Daddy...?” the girl said, startled.

The banging continued.

The little girl could only sit and watch the proceedings. Eventually, the door was violently and rudely opened.

“...Dadd...ee?!”

She was wrong. It was not her father. The people who entered the door were people she had never seen before. There were several men, all dressed in black. She felt afraid. She froze, unable to make a move, not even daring to make a sound.

They looked exactly like the “men in black” whom her father had talked about.

Her father’s warning ran vividly through her mind.

“If they find you, they’ll kill you.”

She wanted to scream for her daddy, but she couldn’t utter a sound. Her body trembled and all she could do was squeeze the rabbit doll tightly in her arms. The men in black looked at her. One of them took out a mobile phone and began to make a call somewhere.



By the time Momo and Daniel arrived, after having delivered a soul to Heaven, the area was already filled with cars with sirens and flashing lights. The place was packed with a seemingly infinite number of people.

“It looks like we’re too late...” Daniel murmured softly.

Momo and Daniel floated into the house, where they saw people busily moving about. Of course, nobody could see them.

There was no sign of Towa. It seemed that the men in black had already taken her to the “outside world.”

Momo sat on the bed and gazed around the room, which had now lost its resident. Daniel followed and hopped onto Momo’s lap. Several people, oblivious to their presence, passed in front of them. She heard someone calling.

“...Momo?”

“What?!” she exclaimed.

She turned towards the voice. She hoped it might be Towa. But it was not. The voice belonged to a cheerless adult. It was a woman, draped from head to toe in a black cape.



“What’s going on, Momo?” said the woman. “What are you doing here?”

She was another shinigami. She did not smile as Momo did, but instead wore a grim expression. This was how the other shinigami looked. However, she was one of the few who understood Momo.

“I see. So she’s under your jurisdiction. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interfere,” Momo apologized, and bowed her head contritely.

“You got involved with the humans again, didn’t you?” the other shinigami asked. “And with someone related to the main soul.”

“Yes...” Momo answered. “But I couldn’t do anything for her.”

“Maybe it’s better that way.”

“What do you mean?” Momo asked.

“He was so worried about leaving the little girl behind. His feelings were so powerful they prevented him from going to Heaven. And even if he did, he probably wouldn’t be very happy up there.”

“I see...” Momo sighed.

She caressed Daniel’s head softly. Daniel said nothing. The only sound was the bell on his collar.



“We’ve located the young girl... Yes, she appears to be very frightened...”

The man in black made contact with the “outside.” The girl didn’t understand. She didn’t know what they were talking about. One of them approached the girl. Her body stiffened with fear. They were going to kill her.

“Hey...” the man said.

“Kyaaaaaaaa! Noooooooooo! Aaaaaaaggghhhh!”

The girl was in a panic. Her eyes lost focus and she screamed like a broken toy. Eventually, she stopped. Her mouth remained open, yet she didn’t make a sound.

“...It looks like she’s in bad shape...” Another man in black spoke up. “She’s

terrified... It's a miracle she's even alive..."

"That's true... but what's with this place? It's full of stuffed animals and toys. It's crazy. Don't you think it's crazy?"

The man next to the girl sighed in response. "Are you kidding? We're talking about a murderer here. It's only normal that a guy like him acts crazy."

"That's for sure."

"Yep."

The man took another look around the room. The door had been solidly locked. The windows were locked from the outside as well. And the entire room was so filled with stuffed animals and toys the floor was hardly visible. It was, no matter how one looked at it, an extremely unusual sight.

Towa was simply frightened and sad. "Why, why, Daddy?" she asked herself. "Why, why? Please come and save me, Daddy."

Towa's father, or rather, the man pretending to be her father, was dead. Pursued by someone or something, he dashed into the street. He was hit and instantly killed by an oncoming truck.

He had been overwhelmed with paranoia and was unable to walk straight. A passing police officer called to him to watch out. Seeing the cop, the man ran. The officer gave chase.

The man was a criminal. His rap sheet listed him as a habitual thief, a killer, a kidnapper and a fugitive.

Five years ago, the man forcibly entered a house he had targeted. At the time, he had only begun the business of stealing. Things were going so laughably well he completely let his guard down.

The couple who owned the house came home while he was still there. He was caught. A struggle ensued and he inadvertently stabbed the husband in the chest. With his hands soaked in blood and panic welling up within him, he decided to stab the wife as well. But he could not bring himself to kill the other

witness.

The baby's cry brought him back to his senses. The wife had called the police before she was killed. Hearing the oncoming police sirens, the man ran, taking the baby with him.

He hadn't intended to kill anyone. He had only wanted the money. But now he had murdered, and the blood on his hands was still warm. The baby he held also felt warm.

The man ran. He hid in a safe house, a European-style dwelling, used by the man who had taught him how to steal. He dressed himself in a suit and assumed the appearance of a salaried worker, but continued his trade as a thief.

He named the baby Towa, and raised her as his own. It was his way of atoning for his sins. But in the process, he came to love the baby very much. If he were ever to lose her, he would go mad. So he locked her up in a room and told her lies.

The baby eventually grew up. And the little girl would always see the man as her father.

"Ah, my sweet Towa. My cute little Towa. Please don't go anywhere. This world means nothing to me without you. Without you, it would be the death of me. My loving Towa." The man uttered these words just before he died.

The police did a background check on the man from the traffic accident. The man's prints matched those of the suspect from a kidnapping case five years earlier. The case was finally solved.

The police had been investigating an area where the suspect was thought to be hiding out. Based on the testimonies of witnesses, they pinpointed the exact location of the house and moved in.

In this manner, they rescued the baby—now a little girl—who had been kidnapped five years ago. The girl, surrounded by toys, was terribly frightened and couldn't even speak. Those involved in the case were saddened to tears, imagining what terrible things might have happened to the child.

But the truth was a lie, and the lie was the truth.

The little girl never let go of the rabbit doll she was clutching at the time of her discovery. She suffered extreme psychological shock and was unable to speak. The police concluded she was the victim of abuse and put her in a mental institution.

Although she couldn't speak, as she sat on her hospital bed, she still tried very hard to communicate with the adults around her. By reading her lips, they discovered she was trying to say, "Where's Daddy?"

Each and every day, she would look out the window at the sky. Those around her sadly assumed that she was searching for her murdered parents. Nobody had the heart to tell her that her parents were already dead.

Daddy, Towa is here... she thought. When are you coming back?

She didn't know he would never return. And so she continued to look up at the sky. The lie was the truth, and the truth was a lie.

The little girl continued to wait for her "father" who would never come home again.



"What's going to happen to that girl, now that she's been taken outside that little square room?" Daniel asked softly.

Neither Momo nor the lady shinigami knew the answer.

"A person's end is predetermined, but their life is not," Momo said. "There are an infinite number of roads on which a life can travel. They can lose their way, but still, in the end, they arrive at the place that was decided for them."

Momo offered this explanation, but still, she didn't know what fate awaited the little girl.

"Her world was a lie," Momo continued. "But that room was her world, and to her, it was the truth. But... there are memories a person would want to erase. And there are memories that remain unknown. Though she'll be forced to know them in time. If there are several possible fates, I wonder if there could have been a better fate for Towa?"

She had been named Towa^[1] to symbolize "eternity," but once she entered

the outside world, she lost that designation.

“Well...” Daniel murmured. “If she had been left there, then her only future would have been inside that square room... Even if it was painful, at least she has a future now.”

“...Yes... that’s true... Yes...” Momo agreed.

But tears welled up in her eyes and looked ready to spill out at any moment.

“...In the end,” she said, “we couldn’t do anything for her... We couldn’t... I thought telling her the truth was the right thing to do... that’s what I thought... but is this world real for her now? Wouldn’t it have been better for her to stay where she was? What’s the right thing to do?”

Seeing Momo so dispirited, Daniel spoke to her with clarity and strength. “If we knew that,” he said, “then we’d never have to struggle. We struggle because we don’t know. And besides, we’re talking about humans! You’re trying your best, Momo. That’s why we’re here. Although you’re still a crybaby,” Daniel said, and smiled.

Momo brightened up as well. Just a little bit.

ballad for innocence / momo — fin.

Finale

Open Your Eyes

There, by herself, stood a girl.

The girl wore red shoes.

Though she did not know why.

For the girl had no memory.

The girl carried the burden of a single mission.

To deliver someone's life.

—To take it.

That was her appointed mission, a mission born of tears.

She was an administrator of death.

A dark messenger.

Why was she born?

Why is she here?

And so, the girl set out.

To find herself.

She was a white presence amidst a world of black.

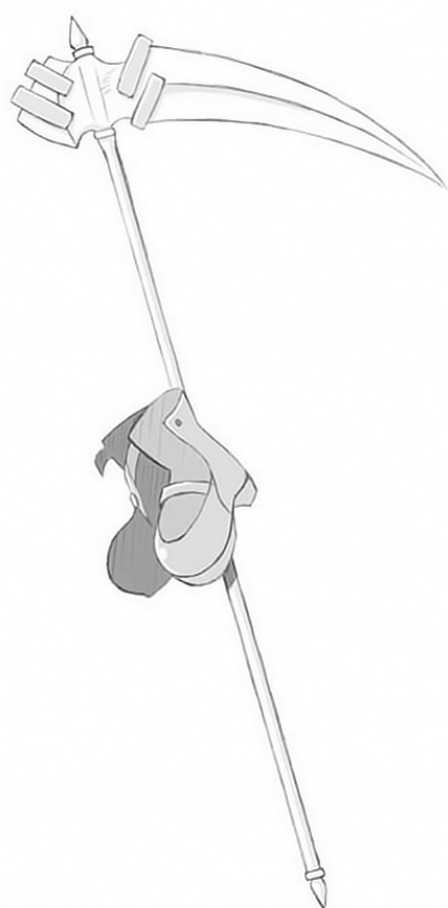
Pure white, born of tears.

She needed to find the reason for her existence.

She would carry the black with her, but only in her pupils, and see the world without pretense. A day would come when she would understand.

For certain...

momo: the girl god of death "ballad"
— all over.



“Graffiti”

Afterword of Graffiti

I’m very bad with afterwords. Or rather, since I’ve never written one and since I’m one of those people who don’t even read afterwords, this makes it seem more like one of those “uh, I don’t know” type of situations.

So I call this, not an “afterword,” but rather, “graffiti.” In other words, it’s sort of like a rant. So read it casually, observe it; humor me.

By the way, these writings got rejected the first time around. Then the next time, I myself rejected them. So now, I’m writing this in a corner of the editorial office, at a desk, and enduring “who the hell is that” stares from everyone around me.

But the fact that I’m even writing an afterword and have been able to get this far is thanks to all the many, many people who’ve supported and cheered me on. I could give thanks for the rest of my life and it probably wouldn’t be enough.

And to all you readers who have picked this book up, you people who have read it, what do you think? If you haven’t read it yet and just decided to skip to this page, did it pique your curiosity just a bit?

I’m still not a good enough writer yet; there are still a lot of areas where I’m deficient. But even so, if this story can mean “something” to you, then I’m satisfied.

If you find it funny, please laugh.

And if it sucks, please laugh too.

Basking in the warm spring sun,
K-Ske Hasegawa, 2003



Special Thanks

Neko-sama, Ishikawa-sama, K-sama, Nanakusa-sama, Miki-sama, to all my many sensei, my family, lovely boyfriends and girlfriends, and...

To everyone who was involved in this book, who had a hand in its creation, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you.

for “your lovely world!!”

about the author

Name: K-Ske Hasegawa *Born on:* December 26

Blood Type: O

Hometown: Fukui-ken *Likes:* Music, soccer, potato chips *Dislikes:* Sour things, spicy things *Special abilities:* Forgetfulness

about the artist

Name: Nanakusa *Born in:* 1979

Shinigami's illustrator is a Kansai native residing in Kyoto, who derives pleasure from games, robots and animation. Specializes in living in the shadows.

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This release is revision 1.0 (December 15th, 2022).
For formatting corrections, etc., contact
HabaneroScans@Gmail.com

There's a J-Novel license request thread [here](#).

Endnotes

[1](#) *Sato* is the Japanese word for “sugar.” It is also a common surname, so this is clearly a play on words.

[2](#) An *onigiri* is a sticky rice ball snack wrapped in “nori” (seaweed) and is usually filled with pickled plum, salted salmon or any other salty or sour ingredient.

[3](#) A *bento* is a Japanese-style boxed lunch. A traditional bento consists of fish or meat, rice and one or more pickled or cooked vegetables as a side dish. Bento boxes range from containers made of disposable materials to ornately handcrafted lacquer ware.

[4](#) *Calpis* is a non-carbonated soft drink. It is sold as a concentrate which first has to be mixed with water, or sometimes milk, before consumption.

[5](#) Tetsuya Watari is a Japanese action star best known for his roles in several yakuza/gangster films.

[6](#) The Japanese characters for *towa* mean “eternity” or “forever.”

[7](#) The original derogatory moniker used here is ディス, *diss* (as in “diss track” or “disrespect”). Calling her “Dis/Diss” in English wouldn’t make sense, though, so Seven Seas went with “Reaper.” Personally, that doesn’t make much sense either, since that’s her job (it’d be like calling a janitor “cleaner” etc.), so I suspect the translator just misread “Diss” and thought it was supposed to be “Death,” which is what they use in volume 2. To quote the author when I asked about it: “”ディス” = “diss” or “dis-”. Quotes from hip-hop rap slang. In the story, Momo is called an eccentric. Because she is different from the other reapers. So “Diss” means that she is denied to exist. and is different from others. This is why she is called ‘Diss(or dis-)’.” So it just means “weirdo,” “freak,” “abnormal,” “aberration,” etc. here, but in an extremely offensive manner.

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